



**Between chaos and control: a practice-based investigation into the creative process of an improvised micro-budget screen production.**

An exegesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **DECLARATION**

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the durable record is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Leo Berkeley

31 August 2011

# NAVIGATION

The Durable Record of this PhD research project has three components:

## 1. An exegetical text

The written document that follows discusses the production of the film *How To Change The World* and the research contained in and associated with that project. It assumes the film has been viewed prior to reading the text. References will be made in this document to both the film (contained on DVD1) and some related video material (contained on DVD2).

### *Bibliography*

The exegesis contains a bibliography at the end, rather than a reference list. This approach was chosen to convey the scope of reading that informed the research, beyond the works specifically referred to in the document.

## 2. DVD1

This disc contains the film *How To Change The World*, a 75 minute motion picture. The disc should play on all DVD players and computers with a DVD drive. There are menu options for playing the film in full or selecting a range of individual scenes.

## 3. DVD2

This disc contains a selection of video clips, from the film *How To Change The World* and from other productions, which are referred to in the text. A list of the video clips on DVD2 can be found in Appendix 5.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would also like to acknowledge the work of Kathleen Weekley, who provided copy editing on the text in the final stages of the process, in line with the policy for the editing of research theses by professional editors developed by the Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies collaboratively with the Council of Australian Societies of Editors.

# SUMMARY

This PhD research has been conducted by project and, through the production of a 75 minute film called *How To Change The World*, has investigated screen production practice as research. The second component of the submission is this exegetical text. Here I discuss the research journey I have undertaken and my argument for creative practice film production as research. The text is structured as a series of thematic chapters, which explore and critique the key themes that have emerged through undertaking this project.

The research has been concerned with the emerging field of screen production research and aims to contribute towards efforts to define that field. As an exploration through practice, the focus of the research is on my own practice, and I have explored this as an example of screen production in practice, thus the research discoveries have implications for the development of that practice (mine and the field) in the future. Throughout the process I have been concerned with the question of how to conceive of filmmaking as a form of academic research. In that context, the research question used to frame the project is the following:

How can a creative practice in screen production be transformed into a research practice, which integrates professional, cultural and academic experience?

The screen production project *How To Change The World* was developed to enable the consideration of this question, as well as building on themes and approaches explored in my prior filmmaking practice. I describe the film as a playful tapestry of stories exploring the world of a decaying neighbourhood pub. A significant feature of the project's design was that it was a film made on a 'micro' budget. This was seen as a production environment aligned with my creative practice and my values, as well as being suited to the circumstances of creative practice research, with the possibilities for experimentation less constrained by the pressures of a larger budget. *How To Change The World* was also produced without a script and nearly all the dialogue was improvised. The film was designed to explore the significance of improvisation within the screen production process, an increasingly prominent part of my practice over the course of my career. This aspect of the research was initially focused on the performances of the actors but broadened in scope as its relevance to the central research question became more apparent.

Using reflective practice as a methodology, the making of the film was accompanied by a systematic process of documenting my thoughts and ideas, as well as a search for theorists whose ideas resonated with the practice. This search allowed me to identify a number of writers, such as Bourdieu, Bakhtin and Schön, whose theories enabled me to conceptualise my practice in new ways. I would describe all these writers as theorists of practice and it is through their emphasis on acts of 'doing' and 'making' in professional, creative and cultural contexts that I felt they were relevant to the field of screen production.

A significant focus of the research was on issues of identity and agency within the field of screen production. Within the broad framework of ideas proposed by Bourdieu in his work on the field of cultural production and drawing on related theorists such as Schön and cultural anthropologists Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, I have argued that the screen production process for *How To Change The World* was a complex social, cultural and technical environment where I needed to negotiate multiple and often competing priorities in executing creative ideas, often under the pressure of time and resource constraints. The choices made in this improvisational environment were informed by both the history of my positions within the field, in both mainstream and marginal micro-budget sectors, as well as my dispositions to make certain types of films. These dispositions were informed by a range of influences. I investigated the different ways that influences such as key films I have viewed and prior production experiences can be seen to have an impact on the current creative production process. Like Schön's 'surfacing of tacit knowledge' (1983, pp. 49-56), I investigated how my identity as a filmmaker informed the myriad creative and practical decisions

made in the screen production process and whether a more explicit awareness of that identity enhanced my agency in the process, agency in this context being understood as the ability to act independently of the accepted and often internalised norms of the field.

Through an examination of several key scenes in *How To Change The World*, the research analysed the qualities in improvised performances that make them compelling in screen drama, beyond their common designation as 'spontaneous'. The film modelled an approach to the production process that was explicitly trying to reduce the emphasis on control at the shooting stage. My experience in the production of *How To Change The World* suggests that such an approach has potentially far reaching consequences for both the production process and the outcomes of that process. It affects the working and organisation of the production personnel, as well as the style and content of the story that can be told. My engagement with concepts of improvisation has led to a questioning of the nature of the relationship between screen stories and the world they seek to represent.

This doctoral research contributes to the emerging practice and recognition of screen production as research, by proposing a methodology for research in screen production practice that integrates the requirements of the academy with the actions and contexts of practice. This methodology involves developing an understanding of the practitioner's identity through an analysis of their dispositions and positions within the field of screen production (Bourdieu 1993, p. 61), then examining how that identity is evidenced in the decision-making that occurs in the production process. This methodology has been applied to my practice in the production of the film *How To Change The World*, leading to the development of a framework of ideas for understanding this practice in new ways. I have described this approach to practice as 'conversational'.

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This text is one part of a submission for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree. The research has been conducted by project and has three main components:

1. the production of a 75 minute film called *How To Change The World*, which I describe as 'a playful tapestry of stories exploring the world of a decaying neighbourhood pub'<sup>1</sup>;
2. a systematic and documented process of reflection about my filmmaking practice, from creative, professional and scholarly perspectives;
3. an exegetical text that discusses the research journey I have undertaken, the question explored and the conclusions drawn, structured as a series of chapters on the key themes that have emerged through undertaking the project.

As an experienced filmmaker, I initially conceived of my doctoral research as an opportunity to develop my creative practice through making an exploratory investigation of the film production process. I was interested in experimenting and taking risks in ways that, in my experience, would rarely be possible in professional contexts. I hoped that this would increase my understanding of possibilities for different approaches to filmmaking (Geuens 2007; Schön 1983, p. 310). However, while this research focuses on my own practice, and has implications for the development of that practice in the future, it is also concerned with the emerging field of screen production research and aims to contribute towards efforts to define that field. Throughout the process I have been concerned with the question of how to conceive of filmmaking as a form of academic research. I increasingly saw the production of *How To Change The World* as a means of exploring this broader question. In documenting the research journey I have undertaken, this text will view the process from these two perspectives, both interrogating my creative practice in relation to the production of *How To Change The World*, while also considering what it means to transform this creative practice into a research practice.

## The film

The film *How To Change The World* has been submitted on DVD and accompanies this text. While viewing this film is central to understanding the overall research project, it has always been my position that what I am researching is the production process. The relationship between the process and the finished film and the relevance of the process to an understanding of the film are contested issues within the academic literature. The view has been expressed that a film can be fully understood as research by viewing the finished work (Peters 2005). In contrast, David Davies (2004) refers to this perspective as aesthetic empiricism and argues through a range of examples relating to fine art that this position is philosophically untenable. My own position is that a thorough understanding of a screen work requires a consideration of the completed film, the production process and the broad context in which the production occurs. As a screen work, *How To Change The World* both builds on and breaks with my previous practice as a filmmaker. I will argue in this text that the film can only be comprehensively understood in the context of that practice.

## My background as a filmmaker

My creative practice as an independent filmmaker has developed over thirty years. It has been heavily informed by an earlier stage in my life as what could only be described as an obsessive

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed synopsis of the film can be found in Appendix 4. For background information on the film, see the website dedicated to it: [www.howtochangetheworld.com.au](http://www.howtochangetheworld.com.au)



cinephile. For several years in my early adulthood I watched over one thousand films a year, carefully listing them all. As a result, I began my practice as a filmmaker with a wide and diverse knowledge of film history and culture, as well as strong views about film style and the creative use of the medium. The close relationship between my interest in screen culture and my filmmaking practice has been a key issue explored in this research.

My screen production career has been characterised by intermittent activity, with all my works being produced within the low-budget or micro-budget sectors of the field<sup>2</sup>. My most significant achievement from the perspective of the mainstream industry has been the feature film *Holidays On The River Yarra* (1991)<sup>3</sup>. Following the relative success of this film, I spent a number of years writing and developing other feature films, all with a more commercial focus than *Holidays*. The difficulty getting these projects financed led to a disillusionment with both the mainstream industry and the role of the script development process within it. My works since then have reflected an interest in the use of improvised approaches to production and a preference to work in the micro-budget space. The constraints of this space require the filmmaker to work with limited resources and collaborate with mainly inexperienced cast and crew, which can significantly limit the ability of the work to reach a sizeable audience. However, in my view the constraints are outweighed by the greater opportunities available in this space to practice the craft of filmmaking and the greater creative autonomy in which this practice can occur.

The production of *How To Change The World* was designed to explore the micro-budget space, including the possibilities and tensions identified in it. I wanted to experiment with the concept of improvisation in a more extensive and consistent way. I set myself the goal of making a film with no script, no budget and where all the dialogue was improvised<sup>4</sup>. Drawing on my earlier production experiences and my knowledge of other films and filmmakers, I wrote a story outline and worked out a production strategy that I thought would be effective in this situation. The story involved the mixing of fictional characters and people playing themselves within a pub environment. The production strategy involved privileging improvised performances within the production process but trying to integrate these with an expressive use of the camera, mixing fiction and non-fiction in a range of ways and using voice-over to shape a narrative around themes of community and change.

At the start of the process, I was only partially conscious of the context in which these ideas emerged. I had used improvisation in some of my earlier work and was impressed by how it

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<sup>2</sup> The terms 'low budget' and 'micro budget' are variably defined in different national and professional contexts. For the purposes of this document, a 'low budget' production means it is produced professionally paying minimum award rates. A 'micro budget' production means cast and crew are unpaid.

<sup>3</sup> *Holidays On The River Yarra* was an official selection for the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. It also screened at Tokyo, Chicago, Sundance and numerous other international film festivals. It got theatrical releases in Australia and has screened on the Nine Network in this country and Channel 4 in the U.K. It was included in retrospectives of Australian cinema that were held at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris (1991) and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1995). More recently, it was screened on SBS Television as David Stratton's Movie of the Week (2003) and Foxtel (2004). Further details about the film's distribution and critical reception can be found at <http://www.innersense.com.au/mif/berkeley.html>.

<sup>4</sup> While there was no script in the traditional sense, there were two short outlines (less than two pages each) from which production personnel and I worked. These can be found in Appendix I. While no money was spent on paying participants and hiring equipment, some money was spent on securing the main location (\$5,000), catering and reimbursing cast and crew for travel and parking expenses.

influenced the feel of the film. I was also struck by the work of some directors who used improvisation (for example, Robert Altman, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette) and was aware of approaches similar to the one I was considering. For instance, I had always admired how Jean-Luc Godard used voice-over to weave together a narrative from extremely diverse fragments of drama, social commentary and personal reflection. As the research developed, my understanding of the context in which my creative impulses formed became much more detailed. New, highly relevant links emerged with my past practices and influences.

## **A different journey**

In conjunction with my career in filmmaking, over the past decade I have been working as a university academic. This role initially involved teaching screen production in degrees with a professional practice focus. More recently I have also been exploring the possibilities of research as a means to develop my practice, which has led to my doctoral research. A clearer sense of how this may occur has emerged during the course of the doctoral project. While the research was initially focused on the production process in the making of *How To Change The World*, it has also increasingly had the characteristics of a different journey, involving a transformation in my creative practice from that of a professional filmmaker towards what could be described as that of a scholar/practitioner. An important part of the research has been investigating approaches to my practice that might allow me to achieve this transformation. This requires developing and implementing approaches to the screen production process that are valid as research. In many cases, it involves a more systematic approach to reflecting on, articulating and documenting my processes. While these reflective activities previously existed in my practice (used, for example, in my teaching) they were occasional and informal. In many ways, making *How To Change The World* in the context of a higher degree by research has allowed me to legitimate a process of critical reflection and dialogue that I have always valued but, particularly in the context of mainstream industry practice, have felt was largely perceived as irrelevant and consequently almost entirely neglected.

Through a deeper understanding of my identity as a filmmaker, a longer-term objective of the research is therefore also to find a position within the field of screen production that allows me to develop a sustainable creative practice in screen production, that integrates my creative, professional and academic activities. While by no means the only scholar/practitioner in filmmaking, I see value in this research through helping to develop the academic research field of screen production practice. This objective also supports the engagement of my filmmaking with forms of experimentation, systematic reflection on the process, and dissemination of the outcomes through means other than just exhibiting the film. It creates the potential for my practice to have some impact on both the academic and professional screen production communities, and bridging what has traditionally been a significant divide in the field.

## **The field of screen production**

Through the course of this research, I have become more conscious of the fact that my practice exists within a social, cultural and historical context that has had a significant influence on the direction of my career. In examining the trajectory of my creative and professional practice, I will neither be arguing that it has been solely determined by my individual qualities as a creative practitioner nor the social context in which I have operated. Rather, drawing on the ideas of French sociologist and cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu, I will be examining the interplay between individual agency and the external environment in shaping my past practice and this most recent work.

Bourdieu (1984, 1993) uses the concept of 'field' in his writing about culture as a relatively autonomous area of social activity in which individual agents compete for available positions and the

interests at stake, using the forms of capital, both economic and symbolic, at their disposal. This text will focus on what I would describe as the field of screen production. I use 'screen production' as a generic term to refer to the making of film, television and video works. The historical development of this field has occurred within the context of twentieth century industrial modes of production and mass media forms of popular culture. However, the emergence of the internet and other networked forms of audio-visual communication over the past decade has suggested the beginnings of significant changes in the social, financial and political environment in which screen works are produced and distributed. I will be examining the positioning of my work in relation to these changes.

## **Identity and agency in the moment of practice**

The research initially focused on the process by which a film moves from an idea in the filmmaker's head to a finished work on the screen. This is a complex process that has creative, technical and organisational dimensions. It requires the application of communication and collaboration skills, as well as craft skills in the use of audio-visual technology. It is a fundamentally practical activity that occurs within a broader social and cultural context. Two of the key methods used to reflect on my practice during the research project have been the writing of a research journal and the recording (by collaborators) of the production process on *How To Change The World*, or what is commonly called behind-the-scenes video. On examining this data, one of the most striking things was the extent to which my role was focused on making choices and the thinking that went into deciding which of the available options was the best: which stories did I want to tell; how should I tell them; is this a better take than the previous one; is that background sound too loud; is that actor the best for a particular role; does that dialogue have the right feel; is that joke funny; is that theme being conveyed too subtly; is that jerk in the camerawork unacceptable? In researching my practice as a filmmaker, it became clear that understanding what informed these choices was a key issue. To what extent were these decisions informed by my previous professional and practical experience, by what Bourdieu would describe as my 'feel for the game' (1990, pp. 62-3; 1998, pp. 79-81), or what Donald Schön would describe as 'tacit knowledge' (1983, pp. 49-56)? To what extent were they informed by my dispositions as a filmmaker and a person? And in what ways were these choices a conscious or unconscious effort to position myself and my work within the field of screen production? Importantly, if a key objective of the research was to re-position myself within the field, would a clearer understanding of my decision-making contribute to that?

In developing a more detailed and comprehensive picture of my identity with the field of screen production, the theories of both Bourdieu and Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain (1998) have been applied to my practice. Following Holland et. al., I have linked the concept of identity to that of agency, understood as the ability to act independently of the accepted 'rules' of the field, or what Bourdieu would describe as the 'habitus' (1977, p. 72; 1980, p. 53; 1990, p. 116; 1998, p. 8). The main focus of the research in relation to the issue of agency was on what I have described as the 'moment of practice', or the specific act of directing during the shooting of a film, when the pressures of managing time, resources and people in the execution of creative ideas are immediate. My prior experience of the practice of screen production is that, in these moments, the pressure of circumstances often results in the decision-making defaulting to conventional ways of working. Particularly within the improvisational context of *How To Change The World*, my goal with this research was to develop a greater degree of agency within this immediacy of practice, so that future decisions more consistently reflected my desire to effectively explore new possibilities.

## **Improvisation and control in screen production**

In researching new forms of screen production practice, the issue of improvisation was central to my concerns. Building on prior practical experience in using improvisational strategies with actors, the production of *How To Change The World* and the reflection that accompanied it were a

systematic attempt to produce knowledge about the significance of improvisation within the screen production process. Issues I investigated were the implications for the organization of the shoot when working without a script, as well as the workings of the crew, the nature of the storytelling, the construction of the screen narrative and the way the film can represent the world. Drawing on the ideas of philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981; 1986), I also explored what the distinctive qualities are in improvisational performances on screen that distinguish them from scripted ones.

The investigation led me to focus on the concept of control within the screen production process. Conventional practice within the professional industry privileges careful control of the shooting stage. This control is applied through the use of a script and the organization of the process, which is designed to ensure that lighting, camera, sound and art direction can achieve required levels of technical quality, and spatial and temporal continuity can be maintained in the recording of the action. Re-thinking this professional model of production in my own practice was a focus of *How To Change The World*, where I experimented with various approaches to shooting scenes with improvised performances, while still attempting to make use of the expressive possibilities of camera, lighting and sound. A full consideration of the approach I employed led to me describing it as a conversational model of screen production. In this model, the focus shifts from communicating a pre-determined meaning to instead capturing the shifting negotiation of meaning as it occurs, as well as the multiple viewpoints that are expressed in the process. The significant consequences for the screen narrative and the way it depicts the world resulting from this shift in emphasis have also been explored in both the film and the exegesis.

## Research question

In framing the issues and concerns that informed the project into a research question, I was mindful of the need to develop one that is both relevant to the field and researchable within the context of my own practice. Haseman draws attention to the unease many practice-led researchers in the creative arts feel with the accepted approach of framing their research as responding to a 'problem':

Many practice-led researchers do not commence a research project with a sense of 'a problem'. Indeed, they may be led by what is best described as 'an enthusiasm of practice' (2006, p. 100).

This was certainly the case with my project, where the initial motivation for the research was principally to develop my creative practice through producing a screen work and investigating the production process in a detailed and systematic way. However, as the research progressed, the question I was using to frame the investigation was rethought and refocused on several occasions, until I settled on its current form, which is the following:

How can a creative practice in screen production be transformed into a research practice, which integrates professional, cultural and academic experience?

The screen production project *How To Change The World* was developed to enable the consideration of this question, as well as building on themes and approaches explored in my prior filmmaking practice. A significant feature of the project's design was that it was a micro-budget film. This was seen as a production environment aligned with my creative practice and my values, as well as being suited to the circumstances of creative practice research, with the possibilities for experimentation less constrained by the pressures of a larger budget. The film was also designed to explore the significance of improvisation within the screen production process, an increasingly prominent part of my practice over the course of my career. This aspect of the research was initially focused on the performances of the actors but broadened in scope as its relevance to the central research question became more apparent. The research question also informed an analysis of my identity as a screen practitioner, undertaken through an examination of the decision-making

and the contexts in which the practice occurred. The objective of this analysis was, as an outcome of the research process, to enable a greater degree of agency in future screen production practice.

## **Chapter summary**

The rest of the document has been divided into chapters that reflect the key areas of focus for the research. A summary of these chapters follows.

### *Chapter 2: Methodology*

Screen production practice as a form of academic research is still an emerging field, without a body of literature of any scale on its methodologies. Chapter 2 therefore devotes a considerable amount of attention to reviewing on what basis it is valid to conceive of the production of a film as research. Research involving practice is a focus of this review, in related fields such as art & design, as well as social science disciplines like anthropology. The relevance to the screen production process of methodologies such as practice-based and practice-led research, auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry are considered. The ideas of Bourdieu and Schön are discussed in relation to the epistemological specificity of practice. Some recent contributions to this issue with a specific focus on media production from Bell (2006) and Dovey (2007) are addressed. Following this review, the chapter concludes with a statement of the methodological principles under which the research was conducted and the research methods based on these principles that were used.

### *Chapter 3: Two histories*

Bourdieu suggests that understanding the practice of cultural producers involves the understanding of two histories, and how those histories meet and interact - 'the history of the positions they occupy and the history of their dispositions' (1993, p. 61). An examination of these two histories and how they inform my practice in the making of *How To Change The World* is the focus of chapter 3. The objective of this examination is to develop a picture of my identity as a filmmaker. The linking of the concepts of identity and agency is then introduced. The discussion of dispositions concentrates on the role of past cinematic influences on my current practice and how they are manifested in *How To Change The World*. It is proposed that these influences operate in various ways, including explicit references to a personal canon of exemplary films (Downton 2003, p.113), and the deeper absorption, over time, of an influential filmmaker's work into my own dispositions as a creative practitioner. The influence of the films of Alexander Kluge on *How To Change The World* is discussed as an example of the latter case. The trajectory of my career is then outlined, in relation to its positioning within both the mainstream and micro-budget sectors of the screen production industry. The specific application of Bourdieu's concept of habitus is applied to the screen production industry and to aspects of the practice within the production of *How To Change The World*.

### *Chapter 4: Micro-budget filmmaking*

Chapter 4 focuses on the practice of micro-budget filmmaking, considering both the constraints of the form and the creative possibilities when making a film with little or no money. Critiques of the mainstream screen production industry by Geuens (2000; 2007) and others around the use of the script, concepts of continuity and the overall level of control exercised through the production process are referred to. Micro-budget filmmaking is positioned with reference to the mainstream industry around the greater possibilities the former offers for a more exploratory approach to filmmaking. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital is applied to a discussion of the participation of cast and crew in micro-budget productions (1984; 1993). The ethics of the form and its relationship to the professional sector are covered in this discussion. The chapter concludes with a detailed examination of the shooting of one scene in *How To Change The World* (the shot tower

scene) and what can be learned about the practice of micro-budget production from this example. Issues such as authorial intention, cast and crew dynamics, how the positioning of the film informs specific shot decisions and the significance of new technology for micro-budget production are addressed.

### *Chapter 5: Agency - beyond scrambling*

Chapter 5 focuses on the issue of agency in screen production practice. The discussion of agency is specifically located within the act of filming, or what is described as the 'moment of practice'. The tendency to default to conventional approaches to filming under the pressures of the situation is highlighted, with reference to the author's prior experience in the professional industry. Agency is seen as the ability to counter this tendency. It is suggested that agency could be acquired or enhanced through the type of reflective research undertaken in this project. The concept of 'scrambling' is highlighted as a feature of the author's research diary, a term designed to capture the chaotic, improvisational pragmatics of the micro-budget screen production process, with its complex competing priorities and readjustment of plans in a constantly changing creative environment. Four examples from the production of *How To Change The World* are discussed in detail, highlighting the issue of agency within the 'scrambling' environment of the film's shooting stage and tensions in the process around the extent to which events should or could be controlled. Among these examples are the attempt to implement predetermined visual strategies in camera movement and lighting, as well as the 'pub customer' sequences, which involved non-actors participating in the film.

### *Chapter 6: Improvisation*

This chapter examines the role of improvisation within the screen production process. Through looking at the production of *How To Change The World*, where unscripted dialogue was used, it is argued that approaches that more explicitly engage with concepts of improvisation offer both risks and possibilities for the creative process of screen production. The relevance of the theories of Bakhtin around the concept of the dialogic is considered in relation to developing a better understanding of the qualities that distinguish improvised performances from scripted ones. In this discussion, reference is made to performance theory and discussions about improvisation in theatre (Schechner, 1988) and in jazz music (Soules, 2004). The chapter highlights tensions in the screen production process between improvised performances and accepted modes of production, which are often premised on concepts of control developed in the early years of the Hollywood film industry and widely applied throughout the screen production field. The chapter also discusses attempts to more broadly structure a production around the concept of improvisation, which has significant implications for both the way a film is shot and the nature of the story being told.

### *Chapter 7: Conclusion*

In responding to the central research question, Chapter 7 argues that the transformation of a creative practice in screen production into a research practice requires an integrated consideration of the screen work and the reflective material associated with it. This reflective material includes the systematic documentation of the production process, as well as the identification of theoretical frameworks that inform the research and provide insight into the specificity of the screen production process. The chapter concludes that the research process has enabled the development of a possible methodology for screen production research, as well as a body of concepts that frame the practice in new and meaningful ways. This conceptual framework can be used to inform future practice, by both the researcher and others.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

To what extent is it valid to conceive of the production of a film as research? Filmmaking is a creative practice that is usually defined in professional and industrial contexts. The production process, especially in drama production, is technically and logistically complex. It is also inherently collaborative, involving an elaborate mix of human experience in social contexts that I feel cannot be adequately understood if subjective, personal, creative and emotional factors are excluded. At the start of this project and throughout its course, I have been considering the question: what is required to change my creative practice in screen production into a research practice? As a filmmaker, what should I do differently, or additionally, to successfully make this transition? This raises issues of how my creative practice can be reconciled with the objectives of research, which, according to Hammersley, should be 'the production of knowledge' (1995, p.118)<sup>5</sup>. All of the film and television projects I have been involved with throughout my career have developed my knowledge of my profession and, in my work as a university lecturer in the discipline of media production, I have been involved in articulating and disseminating this knowledge. Is this sufficient for this process to be called research? On a general level, it may be. However, I feel some additional elements are necessary for it to be recognised as research in an academic context. Mason (1996, pp. 16, 19) stresses the importance of consistency, coherence and rigour in the intellectual design of academic research. Having developed research questions, the researcher then needs to establish that the questions are researchable (both practically and epistemologically) and linked to methodologies and methods that conceptually and practically will help provide answers. In this context, it has been important to develop a methodology for the research that is appropriate for the activity being undertaken but which also results in any knowledge claims arising from the research being accepted as valid by my peers and the broader academic community.

Traditional quantitative research methodologies stress the importance of objectivity and lack of bias in how knowledge is produced through research (Bryman 2001, pp. 70-74). This is often contrasted with qualitative research, which tends to focus more on subjective experiences and the construction of meaning about the social world, an approach more appropriate to this project. So if my research is based on my own observations and reflections while involved in the practical production of a film I have also conceived, does this introduce an unacceptable level of bias or lack of objectivity into the research, thereby invalidating the conclusions drawn?

Both Hammersley and Oakley argue that the oppositional way in which quantitative and qualitative research has often been discussed within the research community is unnecessary and unhelpful (Hammersley 1992, pp. 39-55; Oakley 1998). Quantitative methodologies are designed to establish the validity and reliability of the researcher's analysis, although the epistemological basis of this has been challenged (Bryman 2001, pp. 77-80). Bryman describes how some writers have argued against the concepts of validity and reliability being applied to qualitative research, as they are critical of the view 'that a single absolute account of social reality is feasible'. Instead they propose alternative criteria such as trustworthiness and authenticity, which better reflect an interpretive view of the nature of social reality (Bryman 2001, p. 272). Narayan (1993) supports this view in relation to his anthropological research, as well as the distinction that is often drawn between subjective knowledge and objective truth.

'Objectivity' must be replaced by an involvement that is unabashedly subjective as it interacts with and invites other subjectivities to take a place in anthropological productions.

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<sup>5</sup> Also see the definition of research in *Excellence in Research for Australia: ERA 2010 Evaluation Guidelines*: 'For the purposes of ERA, research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative.' (2010, p. 17)

Knowledge, in this scheme, is not transcendental, but situated, negotiated, and part of an ongoing process. This process spans personal, professional and cultural domains (Narayan, 1993, p. 682).

Narayan (1993) suggests the goal of the researcher should not be to deny the subjectivity of their role but rather to fully contextualise it, critically addressing how their multiple subjectivities (considering education, gender, sexual orientation and class factors) relate to the people they are studying.

Marshall & Rossman (1999) suggest that an autobiographical element is a common feature of research in applied fields and does not, of itself, invalidate the research.

The qualitative researcher's challenge is to demonstrate that this personal interest will not bias the study. A sensitive awareness of the methodological literature about the self in conducting inquiry, interpreting data, and constructing the final narrative helps, as does knowledge of the epistemological debate about what constitutes knowledge and knowledge claims (Marshall & Rossman 1999, p. 28).

With their focus on understanding human behaviour, the interpretive methodologies of qualitative research seem more appropriate to the personal, social and cultural environment of a screen production project (Gray & Malins, pp.19-21). In theory, it would have been possible for an external researcher to observe the production of *How To Change The World* and quite likely that worthwhile knowledge would have been produced. Interviews could have been conducted with myself, focus groups held with the cast and crew, documentary and video evidence examined and thick description of the process recorded and analysed. However, my concern with this approach lies in the primary role I give to practice in this research. Donald Schön has drawn attention to this concern (1983, pp. 307- 309) and the danger that research by non-practitioners produces knowledge that is of little value to practitioners:

when we reject the traditional view of professional knowledge, recognizing that practitioners may *become* reflective researchers in situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and conflict, we have recast the relationship between research and practice. For on this perspective, research is an activity of practitioners. It is triggered by features of the practice situation, undertaken on the spot, and immediately linked to action. There is no question of an "exchange" between research and practice or of the "implementation" of research results, when the frame- or theory-testing experiments of the practitioner at the same time transform the practice situation. Here the exchange between research and practice is immediate, and reflection-in-action is its own implementation (ibid., pp. 308-9; italics in original).

Bourdieu has also written extensively about the epistemological specificity of practice and the need to consider the logic of practice as distinct from the 'logic of thought and discourse' (1980, p. 80). A long-standing critic of structuralism, he stresses in *The Logic Of Practice* (1980) how Saussure constructed modern linguistics to give language (*langue*) a primacy over speech (*parole*), despite the fact that 'a language cannot be apprehended outside the speech, a language is learned through speech and speech is the origin of innovations and transformations in language' (1980, p. 30).

While the methodological dangers of distorting an understanding of practice by turning it into an object of reflection also exist for the practitioner, the latter is in a stronger position to effectively engage with the specific exigencies of practice, for instance, the 'uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and conflict' referred to by Schön (p. 308) or that practice 'unfolds in time' (Bourdieu 1980, p. 81) and hence has the quality of irreversibility.

Its temporal structure, that is, its rhythm, its tempo, and above all its directionality is constitutive of its meaning (Bourdieu 1980, p. 81).



Research involving practice in fields such as design, education and the creative arts is increasingly common and there is an increasing amount of literature on its status and conduct (Haseman 2006; Downton 2003)<sup>6</sup>. Like other forms of qualitative research, practitioner research is subject to epistemological questions about the validity of its knowledge claims. In addressing these questions, using a diary as a self-reflexive method of data collection is one approach that seems appropriate to this model (Bryman & Burgess 1999, pp. xxi-xxii, xxxix; Gray and Malins 2004, pp. 57-63). Writing the diary in a manner that is systematic, critically reflective and relates both practice and ideas to relevant theory are other methods of establishing the inquiry as valid research (Marshall & Rossman 1999, p. 29).

Haseman argues that practice research comes in a number of forms and that there are significant distinctions between practice-led and practice-based research; the former is less satisfied with existing qualitative methodologies and has a focus on research outputs being made 'through the symbolic language and forms of their practice' (2006, pp. 100-101). In the specific field of screen production, the material is more limited, although there has been a focus on this area in the *Journal of Media Practice*, with Bell (2006; 2008) and Dovey (2007) in particular making valuable contributions. While some of the discussion about practice research has an understandably defensive tone, with a focus on arguing for the legitimacy of the approach in relation to the more established forms of research in the physical and human sciences, there is a recognition that traditional quantitative and qualitative methodologies used in these areas may not be appropriate where the research involves practice.

Haseman reviews the often uncomfortable fit that results when practice-led research is conducted using a range of qualitative methodologies, proposing that a 'third paradigm' is coming into being, that could be termed 'performative research'. He acknowledges that this third paradigm would overlap with qualitative research, as they

share many principal orientations. Certainly, performative research is derived from relativist ontology and celebrates multiple constructed realities. Its plurivocal potential operates through interpretive epistemologies where the knower and the known interact, shape and interpret the other (2006, pp. 103-4).

However, Haseman sees the key difference being in the way research findings are reported, with this third category using the symbolic forms of the medium being researched, rather than discursive text (ibid., p. 102).

Bell (2006) has a specific focus on the situation of the filmmaker as a practitioner/researcher and, like Haseman, suggests that none of the existing and accepted methodologies provide a fully appropriate approach for practice research in the creative arts. Bell proposes the work of American pragmatist philosopher David Davies as a possible way forward, expressed in his book *Art As Performance* (2004). Davies argues for conceiving of an artwork as a performance, that includes both the production process and the end product. Moving beyond the 'contextualism' that stresses the importance of the art/historical context in appreciating a finished work, Davies mounts a detailed philosophical argument that the artwork is the performance of its production as well as the exhibited outcome. While this view is quite radical and runs counter to widely-held 'common sense' perceptions of how we understand artworks, including films, it does serve to focus attention on the significance of the production process and the relationship between this process and a meaningful understanding of the finished work. In translating these ideas into a workable research model for screen practitioners, Bell considers the issue of the artist taking the lead in the

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<sup>6</sup> In this context, the 'Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP)' project in the United Kingdom, which involved a number of activities and publications between 2001-2006 is an example: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/>

knowledge gathering and being 'both the subject and object of this investigative process' (2006, p. 99), concluding his article by suggesting that auto-ethnography might be the most appropriate form.

Auto-ethnography is one of several social science methodologies, including action research and narrative inquiry, which seemed to have some relevance to the activities being researched in this project and the nature of the inquiry. In different ways these addressed two methodological concerns I had:

- On what basis can knowledge claims be made from a process where the researcher and the practitioner are the same person, who is immersed in the situation being investigated and is actively trying to change it?
- How can objections be addressed that the process is too subjective and the potential for self-indulgence and self-justification too great?

Auto-ethnography as a methodology draws attention to critiques of scholarly objectivity in research. It focuses attention on the researcher's personal as well as academic perspective and usually involves a reflexive interplay between personal experience and the broader culture. A genre that is variably defined by different people and encompasses a wide range of related approaches, Bochner & Ellis (2000) suggest an interest in this more reflexive approach was related to a more diverse range of people becoming ethnographers – in relation to gender, class and ethnicity – resulting in a 'crisis of representation' (p. 741). This was associated with a rejection of the position that the researcher's perspective could or should be regarded as neutral. Given the nature of my research, much of the contextual discussion has significant autobiographical elements. The methods of auto-ethnography have provided me with an insight into how the personal and the subjective can be incorporated into a research project and the epistemological rationale for this.

Narrative inquiry is related to auto-ethnography and could be seen as a version of it. According to Bochner & Ellis, narrative inquiry challenges the 'metarules' of social science inquiry, which privilege 'arguments over feelings, theories over stories, abstractions over concrete events, sophisticated jargon over accessible prose' (2000, p. 746). The idea that a personal story can be a form of academic research is not widely accepted but Bochner & Ellis base their arguments on the post-structural challenge to realist notions of truth and knowledge presented by writers such as Wittgenstein, Derrida and Rorty.

All truths were contingent on the describing activities of human beings. No sharp distinctions could be made between facts and values. If you couldn't eliminate the influence of the observer on the observed, then no theories or findings could ever be completely free of human values. The investigator would always be implicated in the product (ibid., p. 747).

For Bochner & Ellis, the consequence of this was a renewed focus on issues of values and ethics in their research practice. While the activities of an ethnographer have some significant differences to my activities as a filmmaker, the following passage captures important aspects of my perspective in producing *How To Change The World*.

I turned to narrative as a mode of inquiry because I was persuaded that social science texts needed to construct a different relationship between researchers and subjects and between authors and readers. I wanted a more personal, collaborative, and interactive relationship, one that centered on the question of how human experience is endowed with meaning and on the moral and ethical choices we face as human beings who live in an uncertain and changing world (ibid., pp. 743-4).

Reflecting on narrative inquiry as a methodology forced me to reconsider the extent to which the content of the film I was making was part of the research. Up to that point, I had focused my

research on the production process - the creative, logistical and technical processes that contribute to the finished work. These are, of course, closely entwined with the narrative content of the work. But was the fictional story I was constructing with my production collaborators a potential contribution to knowledge? The clearest way I could frame this question for myself was through a consideration of audience. My former position assumed the audience for my research would be my academic screen production peers. The revised position opened the possibility for a broader audience. Or to put it another way, was my film an ethnographic work? Apart from some reservations about his use of the word 'reality', the following passage from Bochner & Ellis strongly reflects my aspirations for the film *How To Change The World*:

I also wanted to understand the conventions that constrain which stories we can tell and how we can tell them, and to show how people can and do resist the forms of social control that marginalize or silence counternarratives, stories that deviate from or transgress the canonical ones. The texts produced under the rubric of what I call narrative inquiry would be stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalisation, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question (ibid., p. 744).

While recognising significant affinities in perspective between my research and narrative inquiry, I concluded that my research methods did not sufficiently support this approach as my central methodological focus. My reflection and documentation were heavily focused on the production process, whereas the fictional narrative of the production had stronger intuitive elements. Nevertheless, the methodological perspective of this approach and its focus on issues of ethics, values, emotion and the personal has been influential in my thinking about this research.

Donald Schön's influential work *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) has also significantly informed my approach. As the project unfolded, I found his analysis of professional practice as a reflective conversation with the situation a useful way to conceive of the research (Schön 1983, pp. 163-166). As a relatively experienced screen production practitioner, I had designed the film to take an exploratory approach and explicitly test propositions about my creative practice and the process by which I undertake it. For example, can I make a film without a script, or a budget? Schön describes how practitioners do not perform experiments in the positivist, scientific sense but they can be regarded as experiments nonetheless.

The practice context is different from the research context in several important ways, all of which have to do with the relationship between changing things and understanding them. The practitioner has an interest in transforming the situation from what it is to something he likes better. He also has an interest in understanding the situation, but it is the service of his interest in change (ibid., p. 147).

He proposes three types of experiments that practitioners commonly undertake – exploratory, move-testing and hypothesis-testing experiments (ibid., pp. 145-147). I believe my research project has included all these forms of experiment, which I will discuss in more detail in later chapters.

Schön's idea of the goal of the reflective practitioner being to surface and articulate tacit knowledge, with the primary objective being an improvement in practice, was consistent with my desired approach (ibid., pp. 49-56). His concept of 'tacit knowledge' has close parallels with Bourdieu's 'habitus', although without the latter concept's more political perspective on relations of power in society. It nevertheless reflects an understanding of the specificity of practice and the knowledge that resides in practice that was a primary focus of this research.

Schön's focus on improvisation in practice and his characterisation of the process as 'conversational' took on more significance as the research developed, given the central focus on investigating

alternatives to the degree of control usually exerted in a screen production. Both 'improvisation' and 'conversation' were key concepts that applied to the project on many levels, from the approach to acting, to the logistical organization of the shoot and, as Schön suggests, to the research methodology when the activity being undertaken is what he describes as reflection-in-action.

The inquirer's relation to this situation is *transactional*. He shapes the situation, but in conversation with it, so that his own models and appreciations are also shaped by the situation. The phenomena that he seeks to understand are partly of his own making; he is *in the situation that he seeks to understand*' (ibid., pp. 150-151; italics in original)

Schön also proposes a role for research beyond the imperatives of reflection-in-action, through what he describes as 'reflective research' (ibid., pp. 309-323). Within this term, Schön includes a category known as 'frame analysis' (ibid., p. 309), which allows people to 'walk for a while in the writer's or artist's world, sharing his enterprises and methods, seeing as he sees' (ibid., p. 314). I believe the concept of frame analysis is a useful way to consider aspects of my research. A significant part of both my practice and reflection has been positioning what I am doing in *How To Change The World* as a micro-budget alternative to the larger-scale commercial and professional experience I had with *Holidays On The River Yarra*, in relation to issues such as the role of the director, shooting styles and improvisation. Schön argues that frame analysis involves the 'experience of problem setting and solving, the self-definitions and the definitions of success and failure, that would be inherent in a particular choice of role-frame' (ibid., p. 315) and suggests that conveying this to others can be a worthwhile research contribution, encouraging other professionals to consider alternatives in their practice. On this basis, a detailed frame analysis of my role as a filmmaker in the production of *How To Change The World* could be seen as a valid way for my research to have an impact in my field, as well as in relation to my own practice.

When a practitioner becomes aware of his frames, he also becomes aware of the possibility of alternative ways of framing the reality of his practice. He takes note of the values and norms to which he has given priority, and those he has given less importance, or left out of account altogether (Schön 1983, p. 310).

Another category of reflective research that Schön proposes is repertoire-building (ibid., p. 315). It was clear from an analysis of my research journal that a significant part of my practice is informed by previous films I have seen and my earlier experiences as a filmmaker. When faced with creative challenges, problems in practice or unfamiliar situations I would frequently draw on this experience to come up with a solution. Articulating and expanding my 'repertoire' (understood as a body of practical examples that have assisted, inspired or impressed me in resolving creative challenges) could be seen as a worthwhile outcome of the research and a significant component in developing an understanding of my practice.

Schön has a broad focus on the field of professional practice. Writers relevant to practice research in the specific field of screen production are less common. However, Dovey is one who has proposed four broad categories of worthwhile investigation for filmmakers, which align with practice and are also of potential interest to the screen production industry:

- Platform/technology research
- Media on media research
- Aesthetic research
- Process based research

The latter two are the most relevant to my research. Dovey suggests 'aesthetic research' involves stylistic innovation, 'finding new means to say new things' (2007 p. 67) and screen practitioners could learn from art & design colleagues 'who position their work in relation to particular traditions and practices, allowing them to argue for their own specific innovatory practice' (ibid., p. 67). He

describes 'process based research' as 'work in which the production methods, ethics, relationships, ways of generating material, research could be innovative. New ways of working that can be documented and disseminated' (ibid., p. 67). Both these approaches have been an explicit focus of my research from the beginning and their relevance to my project will be discussed in more detail later in this document.

## **Ethics**

Developing a satisfactory approach to address the range of ethical issues that arose in the research was a significant issue, because of its focus on a practice that was seeking to operate within both professional and academic contexts. Making a fiction film as an academic research project highlighted apparent contradictions between the requirements for ethics approval in academic research and the accepted practices of screen production. As an illustration of these contradictions, typical requirements to gain ethics approval are for research participants to be anonymous, which is clearly problematic if the research involves making a fiction film for public exhibition and the research participants are actors. Other issues also needed to be addressed, in relation to privacy, right of withdrawal of data and the protection of participants if the research raised sensitive or emotionally stressful issues. While these concerns required considerable thought in applying for ethics approval, the university Higher Research Ethics Committee that considered the application was not unsympathetic to the specificity of the research methodology in making their judgments. These judgments were consistent with accepted ethical principles that have recently been captured in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (N.H.M.R.C., A.R.C., & A.V.C.C. 2007). The National Statement, with its emphasis on the key underlying principles of respect, beneficence and justice, provides a sound basis on which to frame the process of ethics approval in Australian universities. However, it is by its nature a general document and focuses on the more established forms of research when discussing specific examples. As Carlin (2009) highlights in relation to ethics issues encountered in the writing of creative non-fiction as academic research, when a researcher is operating in fields involving the application of creativity and imagination, a significant amount of the terminology and concepts used in official documents is not well-aligned with the practice of the research, resulting in both researchers and ethics committees getting little guidance or support in resolving philosophically challenging ethical issues. I have discussed these issues in relation to the production of *How To Change The World* in a published refereed conference paper (Berkeley 2009) that is attached to this document as Appendix 2. The application of an ethical approach to screen production practice in a micro-budget environment is also a focus of chapter 4 in this document.

## **Statement of methodology**

The outcome of this review of methodological possibilities has led to the following conclusions about the principles underpinning my approach to this research:

The research is practice-based, focused on the production of a film. This means the research question has emerged from practice, the research question can only be addressed through practice and the primary objective of the research is an improvement in practice.

The methodology used is reflective practice, informed by auto-ethnography (in relation to the role of personal, emotional and narrative issues in research).

This methodology presumes knowledge to be tentative, negotiated, local and context-specific.

The research will have a focus on articulating tacit and practical knowledge.

To ensure knowledge claims have as much validity as possible, the reflective methods will be employed in a systematic, rigorous and documented way, combined with the use of external feedback methods (Gray and Malins 2004, p. 31).

In this context, rigorous means being conscious of my position as a critical researcher/practitioner and the dangers of self-justification, self-indulgence and polemical discourse.

The significance of this research for my own practice and its contribution to the broader field of screen production lie in the articulation of previously tacit knowledge, an analysis of the frame in which my creative work is produced and the focusing of previously vague and disparate elements of my practice into a more systematic and explicit form.

The findings of the research will be at least partially reported in the 'symbolic language and forms' of my practice, as well as discursive text (Haseman 2006, pp. 100-101).

Amongst the literature on practice research in the creative arts, there is little sense that a consensus exists about appropriate methods that are specific to the practice context (Haseman 2006; Bell 2006). However, based on the methodological principles above, I believe the methods I have employed to conduct the research are appropriate for the practice of screen production, while also meeting the objectives of rigorous, documented reflection and feedback aligned with the production process. Importantly, they are also able to meaningfully capture what Bourdieu refers to as the specific qualities of practice, acknowledging

the ambiguities, the polysemic realities, underdetermined or indeterminate, not to speak of partial contradictions and the fuzziness that pervades the whole system and accounts for its flexibility, its openness, in short everything that makes it 'practical' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 132).

## **Research methods**

The following were the reflective practice research methods used:

*The production of the film*, seen as an iterative practical process with reflective and feedback/validation components. The screen production process has many stages at which it is appropriate to reflect and obtain feedback on the development of the project and the extent to which it is effectively meeting its objectives. In pre-production there are extensive discussions with key collaborators (producers, actors, designers, cinematographers) about the project. During the shooting stage there are rushes screenings. This production was not shot full time – the schedule was usually two or three days a week. This meant there were regular opportunities for me and other collaborators to reflect, discuss and adjust plans as we went along. I also had time to digitise footage each week so that trial edits could be undertaken and commented on. In the editing process, there are accepted stages of assembly, rough-cut and fine-cut, where it is meaningful for reflection and feedback to occur. I had trusted collaborators (the two co-producers and the director of photography) from whom I regularly received feedback.

*The 'making of' video*, used as a reflective tool to investigate the production process. Approximately four hours of video footage was taken of the production process, by three of the crew. This included all auditions and rehearsals, the shooting of several scenes in the film and informal interviews with numerous participants at the end of their involvement. The material of the shoot is limited and impressionistic. On one basis this suggests caution should be used in drawing strong conclusions from it, unless there is corroborative data (Gray & Malins 2004, p. 31; Stapleton 2006; Reason & Rowan 1981, p. 239-250). However, in some cases it documents my directions to the crew prior to the shooting of a scene that can then be compared with the final result. It is also possible to track an actor's performance through the audition, rehearsal and shooting stages. The

material captures this process in more detail and I believe it is reasonable to draw some conclusions from it about the production approach taken.

*Participating in the broader discourse of the field.* Two journal articles (Berkeley 2007 & 2011) and two conference papers (Berkeley 2008 & 2009) have been published about key issues that emerged from the research. The research was also presented to people not involved in the production on a number of occasions during the process, specifically for the purposes of feedback. These included three Graduate Research Conference presentations and a screening of the nearly-finished creative work at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. Following this screening, a formal feedback session was conducted, with ethics clearance obtained from participants.

*Keeping a research journal throughout the production as a reflective tool.* I made sixty entries between February 2006 and April 2007, an average of four a month. Entries were the most extensive and frequent in the months leading up to the start of the shoot in October 2006. These entries are kept on computer. The material is a mix of description of what is occurring with my reflections on its significance as it happened. During the post-production stage, which occurred throughout 2007 and into the early months of 2008, I continued to write a journal but on paper. The frequency of entries continued to be around one a week but the content shifted to an increasing focus on conceptualising my practice as research and relating it to theoretical contexts I was reading about, other films and my prior screen production experiences.

*Reading, viewing and the role of theory.* Throughout the process I have read extensively and viewed films that seemed relevant to my research. I have sought out theorists to help me make sense of my research question, to think through ideas and to challenge me, so that I can develop a deeper understanding of my practice.

*An analysis of other documentation.* The screen production process generates a lot of documentation. Key examples of this for *How To Change The World* are story outlines, shooting schedules (which on this production I did myself), creative plans and notes for key collaborators (actors, the director of photography, the production designers), call sheets and shot lists. On a shoot where there was no script in the accepted sense, some of these documents had a greater-than-normal significance.

*The multiple iterations of the edit.* In the context of screen production as research, an interesting consequence of digital technology that I have not seen discussed elsewhere is that filmmakers can save as many versions of the editing of the film as they wish. These are small files that do not take up space on the computer. I edited the film myself in my office (a situation that would have been unthinkable even five years ago) and saved a version virtually every day for reasons of protection against computer malfunction. However, going back through these multiple versions allows a detailed reviewing of the construction of the film throughout the editing process, including how individual shots were handled (which of multiple takes was used and how it was integrated into the other material), individual scenes assembled and the entire film produced. Particularly in the context of a film made without a script, this allows comprehensive access to the crucial editing stage for purposes of research.

In transforming an existing creative practice as a filmmaker into a research practice, I believe I needed to establish that the screen work I have produced went beyond being a project undertaken for personal, creative or professional purposes. I needed to establish that the project had been designed to investigate a research question that was of some significance to the discipline area. I also needed to employ a research methodology that was appropriate for establishing answers to the question. After investigation, I felt that an interpretivist methodology such as reflective practice (informed by auto-ethnography) provided a methodological framework that allowed me to collect and interpret data for this purpose. Critically reflecting on my creative work and recording these reflections in a research diary allowed me to systematically document the research process as it unfolded. If this reflection were informed by relevant social and cultural theory, as well as key texts in film and television (both print and audio-visual), then the process undertaken, the outcomes of

the research and the conclusions reached should satisfy broadly accepted definitions of research and meet appropriate criteria for evaluating qualitative research, such as trustworthiness and authenticity.



# CHAPTER 3: TWO HISTORIES

## Introduction

An analysis of the reflective material produced as part of this research highlights how the many decisions I made as a filmmaker during the production of *How To Change The World* did not occur in a contextual void. When I began the process, it was not sensibly open for me to make any sort of film. I could not make a Hollywood blockbuster, nor an HBO TV series. The film emerged from a history of practice and I would argue cannot be adequately understood independently of that history. I have viewed the objective of this research as providing an understanding of the practice of screen production that may not be possible in other contexts. The opportunity to systematically reflect on the immediacy and the complexity of the practice as it unfolds has provided knowledge of the specific and particular circumstances of the production of *How To Change The World*. I also hope that it may provide insights for others in relation to their own practice. In this chapter I consider this history of my practice. It is clear that the production environment during the making of *How To Change The World* was a contested space of competing demands and priorities. Within this space, how did my previous experiences as a film viewer and a filmmaker have an impact on what occurred?

Capturing the contextual complexity of the decision-making that occurred throughout the production process will be discussed with reference to the theoretical frameworks developed by Schön, Bourdieu and others to account for practical work in professional and cultural environments. Schön's concepts of 'frame analysis', 'tacit knowledge', 'reflection-in-action' and 'repertoire building' will be applied to the production approach I have taken and how it can be conceived of as research (1983). Bourdieu's work on the field of cultural production (1993) and the use he makes of concepts such as habitus, field and capital were helpful in providing a deeper understanding of my practice over the course of my career. Building on Bourdieu's ideas, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain (1998) have developed a theory of cultural agency that I believe is relevant to the situation of filmmakers seeking opportunities to practice. Drawing on Holland et. al.'s ideas, the broader objective of this analysis is to link an understanding of my identity as a filmmaker to greater opportunities for agency in the future.

## Changing The World

The cruelty is that we can understand them both, both are right and no-one will be able to help them. Unless we change the world. At this point all of us in the cinema cried. Because changing the world is so difficult.  
(Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1975) writing about two characters in the Douglas Sirk film *Imitation of Life* (1959)).

The late German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's writing about cinema was as limited as his screen production output was prolific. However, his short article about the Hollywood melodramas of Douglas Sirk is full of striking insights into what makes these films distinctive, reflecting a creative practitioner's perspective that is quite different from most criticism. Fassbinder's quote evokes something about the issue of agency that was a focus in my research in relation to the characters in the film but also, as a more recent realisation, in relation to my own screen production practice.

As a filmmaker, I am interested in portraying characters who lead ordinary lives and showing the social context to the personal changes they are struggling with. My original idea for *How To Change The World* was a loose one. It was little more than to explore a group of characters trying to deal with change in their lives. I chose the community in and around a small neighbourhood pub as the

site where this exploration could be focused. The main emotion I wanted to dramatise was the feeling of powerlessness that can be felt in the face of change, as well as the struggle to overcome this feeling. This could be understood as a struggle for agency. The focus of the film was less on any individual character's triumph against the odds than a deeper and more complex understanding of their circumstances. From both a creative and political perspective, I wanted to tell a story where characters have the capacity to act, but also express the historical and social limits of this.

## **Agency as a filmmaker**

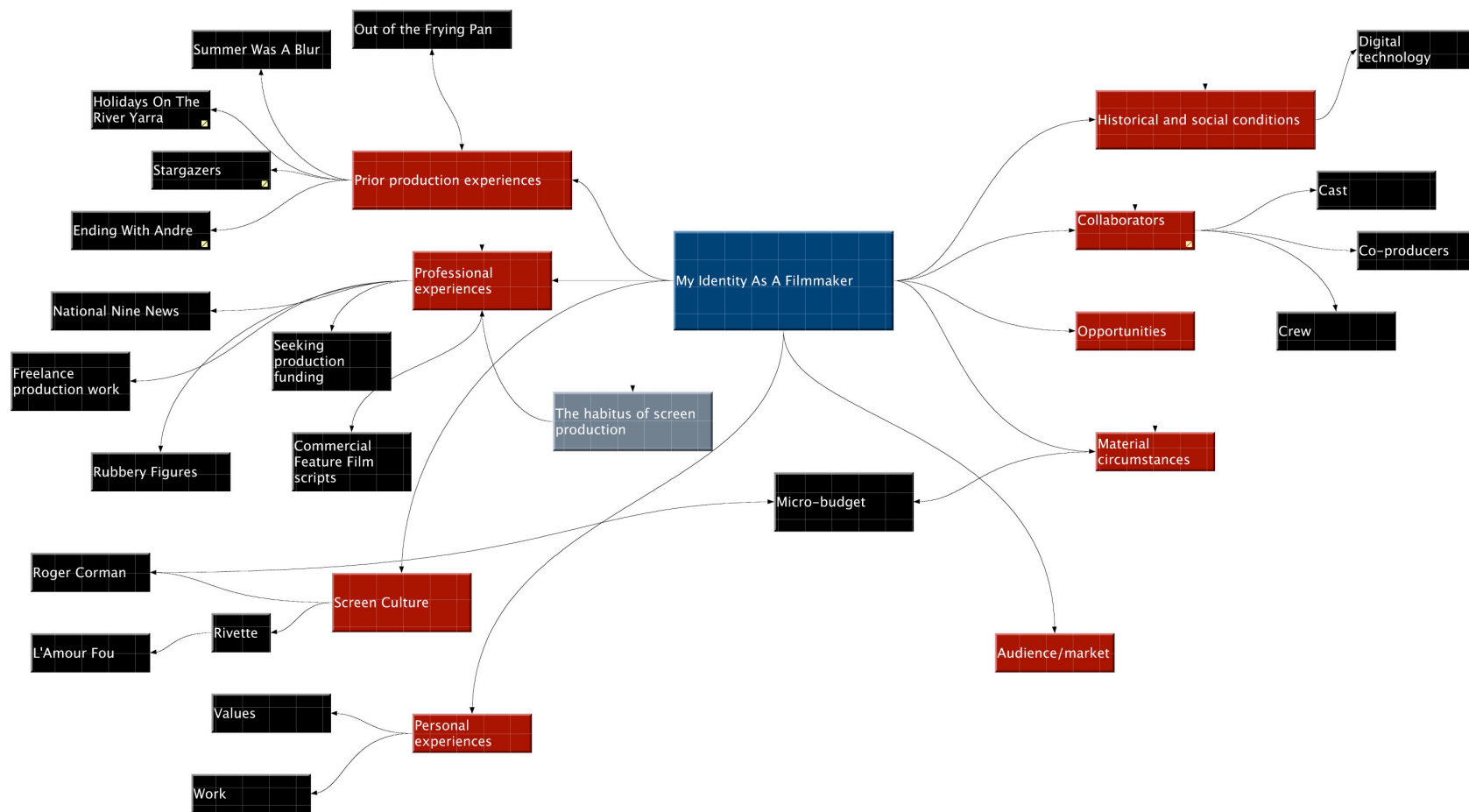
The concept of agency can be broadly defined as the socially constructed capacity to act and make choices (Barker 2003, p. 236; Holland et. al. 1998, p.42; Giddens 1984, pp. 5-16). This can be seen as an important concept for filmmakers because, unlike many other forms of creative activity, filmmaking is a difficult art to practice with any regularity. For a range of reasons but particularly because of the scale and cost of production, as well as the complexity of the technology, opportunities for filmmakers to practice and develop their experience can be scarce. That has certainly been the case over the course of my filmmaking career. With *How To Change The World*, I was exploring the academic research context as a new space in which to practice. Within this context, I have felt there is an opportunity to investigate the issue of agency in more depth. Can an analysis of my experiences making this film cast any light on the issue of how to practice more frequently, more effectively or more innovatively in the future?

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain (1998) link the concepts of identity and agency in their analysis of how people can act with influence in a range of cultural environments. Applying the ideas of Bourdieu, Bakhtin and Vygotsky to their own fieldwork as anthropologists, their ideas interested me as a screen practitioner because they are 'grounded in practice and activity theories' (p. 271) and argue for an understanding of 'identity in practice' (p. 271). Holland et. al. see the possibility for agency emerging from an individual developing an identity within a 'figured world', which is a similar but more contained version of what Bourdieu would describe as a 'field'. Like Bourdieu, they see agents' identities as historically and socially contingent, generated through practice and over time (p. 285).

Before investigating in what ways my practice as a scholar/practitioner offers scope for agency within the field of screen production, I will first consider my identity within this field. Drawing on concepts used by Bourdieu, this will involve a discussion of my dispositions as a filmmaker, as evidenced by my interest in particular films and filmmakers, as well as my prior work as a screen practitioner. It will also involve an examination of the trajectory of my career in screen production, the various positions I have held within the field and how that has changed over time. This examination will look particularly at my experience in both mainstream professional screen production and micro-budget production. Following the section on identity, the issue of agency will then be revisited and explored in more detail, particularly as it applies to what I describe as 'the moment of practice', or the problem of how a filmmaker can assert an independent creative perspective within the complex practical immediacy of the shooting stage.

## **My identity as a filmmaker**

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain see identities and the acts attributed to them as 'always forming and re-forming in relation to historically specific contexts. They come to bear the marks of these contexts and their politics' (1998, p. 284). To better understand the historically specific context that has marked my identity as a filmmaker, I initially undertook a mapping exercise, which is depicted in the figure below.



This mapping activity allowed me to identify salient factors in the contextual environment that influenced the production of *How To Change The World*. It also allowed me to clarify what new ideas and processes I was exploring in this film and make connections with earlier experiences. Bourdieu suggests that understanding the practice of cultural producers involves the understanding of two histories, and how those histories meet and interact - 'the history of the positions they occupy and the history of their dispositions' (1993, p. 61). An examination of these two histories and how they inform my practice in the making of *How To Change The World* is what I would now like to consider.

## Dispositions

Bourdieu uses the term *disposition* to refer to the inclination of individuals to act in certain ways based on social factors such as class, family and education, as well as less tangible subjective factors.

Although positions help to shape dispositions, the latter, in so far as they are the product of independent conditions, have an existence and efficacy of their own and can help to shape positions (1993, p. 61).

In this exegesis, I am using the term to refer to individual inclinations I have as a filmmaker that may influence my creative practice. More specifically, I am using the term to refer to my desire to make specific types of films, based on my values and the accumulating weight of my personal and professional experiences. Within this immediate discussion, my focus will be on my knowledge of other filmmakers and how they have influenced my views about cinema.

The mapping exercise referred to in the previous section made apparent the many links between my experiences as a film viewer and my practice as a filmmaker. My research diary also gives prominence to influential filmmakers in my thinking about filmmaking (for example, Rossellini, Kluuge and the French New Wave).

## *How To Change The World: The role of influences*

An examination of the production of *How To Change The World* and the reflective material produced with it suggests that, in my case, there are different ways in which my knowledge and experience of previously made films influence my current practice. These vary from explicit references to a personal canon of exemplary films (Downton 2003, p.113), to a deeper absorption, over time, of an influential filmmaker's work into my own dispositions as a creative practitioner.

### *Explicit references to a personal canon of exemplary films*

I am aware of at least two shots in *How To Change The World* that were explicitly modelled on shots from films that are important to me. One of these is the opening shot in the scene where Jazz wakes up in Pete's bed after getting drunk on a night out with him (00:48:45<sup>7</sup>). When I was conceiving the coverage for this scene, I particularly wanted to use a composition I remembered from the Rossellini film *Paisa* (1946).

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<sup>7</sup> Timecode references will be used to identify specific shots or moments in *How To Change The World*. They refer to the DVD of the film (DVD I) and are in the format (hours:minutes:seconds).

Image removed for  
copyright reasons.



*Paisa*

*How To Change The World*

To me, it is worth asking why this particular shot is in my personal store of memorable images, rather than the thousands and possibly millions of other images I have seen in my life. There is no doubt that the film this image belongs to has made a big impression on me but the construction of this individual shot is also significant. This says something about the shot but also, I suggest, it says something about me that may be worth exploring. For example, I am interested in shots that frame two characters who are not looking at each other (a stylistic signature of another major Italian director, Michelangelo Antonioni), as well as the use of long lenses and shallow depth of field to separate characters in the same frame for dramatic reasons. To me, these framing strategies can be used to express the existential solitude of people within the context of their relationships and communities, which is a strong dramatic feature of the various wartime stories that comprise *Paisa* (Thomas 2009) and is a central dramatic interest of mine. So, while use of this image may be considered a superficial reference to an admired director, I also think a more considered examination of these references may uncover worthwhile insights into a practitioner's identity. In considering screen production as a form of academic research, it also raises interesting questions about the issue of citation.

*The deeper absorption of an influential filmmaker's work: narrative construction and the films of Alexander Kluge*

A film's narrative construction becomes more problematic at the shooting stage when the film is made without a script. While improvisation can provide performance material that is impressive in its capturing of the unpredictability of human experience, the danger for the film as a whole is that this unpredictable material cannot be shaped into a coherent narrative that gives an audience the sense that they are watching anything more than disconnected fragments of social behaviour.

The original concept for *How To Change The World* was to work from short outlines that described the broad shape of two narratives relating to the central characters (Max, the pub owner and Jazz, the Indian barmaid), as well as the other two main elements of the film – the sequences involving pub customers (who were non-actors) and the *Ghost News*<sup>8</sup>. These outlines did not include details on how the various elements would interrelate or discuss an ending for the overall film. A key judgment for me in planning the production was to what extent to leave things open until I saw what was produced. I wanted to do this as much as possible, within an approach where I was nevertheless confident I could construct something sufficiently coherent whatever happened. Improvisation can produce scenes that are long and with no clear endings or out-points. Worthwhile sections can be messily entwined with

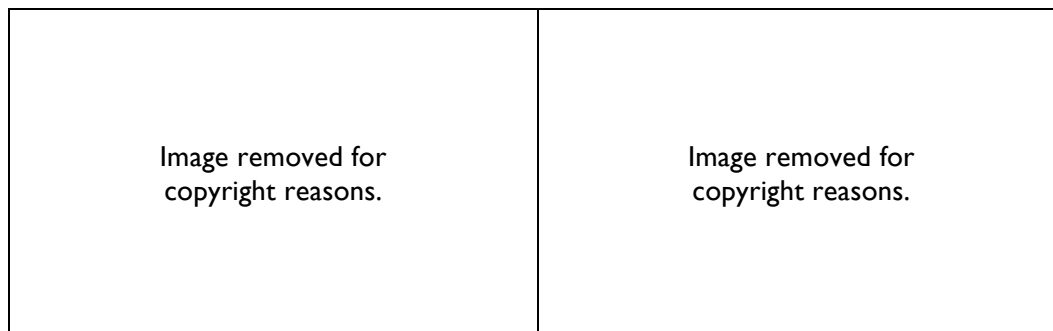
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<sup>8</sup> The outlines referred to can be found in Appendix I

a lot of less interesting material. The plan I developed was to inter-cut stories and use voice-over to achieve an effective narrative structure.

From the beginning, I felt comfortable with this approach, without being able to identify the source of this possibly misplaced confidence. It was not until plans for the film were quite advanced that I realised how closely the narrative model for *How To Change The World* had been influenced by the films of Alexander Kluge, in particular *Occasional Work of a Female Slave* (1973), *In Danger and Distress Compromise Means Death* (1975) and *Artists At the Top of the Big Top: Disoriented* (1968). I had only ever seen these films at the cinema, most recently over twenty years ago.

The connection with Kluge became clearer when I started thinking about the voice-over for the film and consulted a published script I have for Kluge's film *Occasional Work of a Female Slave* (1973), which I remembered had an interesting use of a third-person voice-over, designed to provide a Brechtian-influenced commentary on the dramatic action (Dawson 1975). This script is actually a transcript of the completed work as the film was made without a conventional screenplay.



Left: *Artists At the Top of the Big Top: Disoriented* (1968)

Right: *Occasional Work of a Female Slave* (1973)

Alexander Kluge's films are not widely known or available. However, he was a significant filmmaker in the 1970s and 1980s who has a distinctive creative approach to socially and politically engaged filmmaking. He is also a rare film director who has theorised his practice extensively, as well as writing on topics such as the theory of an oppositional public sphere (referenced by numerous writers on alternative media, including Poster (1996) and Atton (2002)). I am very familiar with his key films of the 1970s, having seen most of them multiple times, at festivals and other one-off screenings. None of his films had been available on DVD until 2007, when they were all released, on sixteen discs, to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday.

Kluge has long been a filmmaker I admire but he had by no means been as influential on my thinking as several directors of the French New Wave or Roberto Rossellini. In reflecting on my creative influences while developing and producing this project, it has become clear to me that Kluge is a more important filmmaker than I had previously thought and, in fact, has been informing my creative practice throughout my career. I can find parallels in the work of Kluge to central aspects of the production of *How To Change The World*. Kluge's materialist approach to political filmmaking is influenced by Brecht, includes a mixture of improvised acting and expository voice-over, a hybrid use of fiction and non-fiction components and an interest in engaging with dreams and fantasies, not so much as belonging to an individual character but as a component of the broader social and cultural landscape

being depicted. Kluge's films are also centrally engaged with a portrayal of characters in relation to questions of politics, social context and personal agency that is quite distinct from the Aristotelean approach to drama critiqued by Brecht but characteristic of much global screen production practice (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson 1985, p. 3; Brecht 1978).

In discussing Jurgen Habermas and his ideas about the public sphere, Kluge has elaborated a theory of the private sphere (by which he seems to mean areas like family, relationships and individual fantasies) and problems that result from 'the noncorrelation of intimacy and public life' (Liebman 1988, p. 45). I would argue that the mixing of fiction and non-fiction components in *How To Change The World* (most explicitly in the *Ghost News* sequence but also through the pub customer conversations being intercut with the fictional characters' stories) was an attempt to creatively explore this sense of the inter-connectedness of public and private spheres.

My identification of Kluge's influence on the design of *How To Change The World* should in no way be seen as a clearly defined or straightforward process. As an example of this, all of the elements described in the previous paragraph are evident in the *Ghost News* sequence but there are many other elements at work as well, from prior personal and professional experiences to the creative work of researching and developing the concept for the film. I was conscious of the influences of my experiences on commercial television news production, my interest in the schlock aesthetics of the low budget exploitation movies of Roger Corman and my personal experiences with professional glaziers on the content and design of this sequence. The work of synthesising these influences into something new is a creative challenge that is complex and only partly conscious. The reflective work that is part of this research makes the process more conscious. However, the question remains about the extent to which the surfacing of this tacit knowledge improves future practice.

I think it has been valuable for me to realise the influence of Kluge on my work, as I have been able to more systematically explore which aspects of his work I find relevant to my own practice. This in turn increases my self-awareness of my identity as a filmmaker and, as Holland et. al. argue, having an identity within a figured world is a pre-condition to having agency in that world (1998, p. 40). Agency occurs over time, as influences are increasingly embedded in identity and experience provides strategies and tools with which to handle difficult situations. In my experience, through clarifying issues of identity, reflective practice research has the potential to accelerate and enhance this process of developing agency.

At this stage of my career, I feel I am sufficiently confident about my practice to use the knowledge of Kluge's influence in a critical and discriminating way. For example, thinking through his films, his writing and his creative approach made me much more explicitly aware of the Brechtian influence on my work as well. Having this awareness allowed a more consistent application of these creative ideas in the production and post-production of *How To Change The World*, in areas like the style and use of the voice-over. From another perspective, Kluge is a much more intellectually demanding and formally experimental filmmaker than I am. As a film viewer, I find his films difficult but rewarding. However, as a filmmaker I am interested in a creative and dramatic approach that is more accessible to a broader audience and do not wish to mirror Kluge's uncompromising approach to this issue.

An interesting feature of Kluge's influence on my creative practice is that initially I was not conscious of it and had not seen his films in a couple of decades. On reflection, it is clear to me that I was influenced by Kluge's films on some level when I developed the initial idea for *How To Change The World*. However, these influences were completely internalised and naturalised within my identity as a filmmaker, so that they only became apparent through the reflection that was part of the research process. My own analysis of the development of my practice is that, at an earlier stage, the influence of filmmakers who I had identified as

central to the way I viewed cinema and filmmaking (in itself a process that occurred over many years) was more awkwardly integrated into my own creative interests. It had the appearance in my work of copying an exemplary filmmaker's work, often clumsily out of context. However, over time, as I became more confident about my practice, the stories I wanted to tell through film and the way I wanted to tell them, these influences became more deeply embedded. This process involved a lot of trial and error in my practice, a lot of production experiences and personal experiences where my dispositions to do things a certain way became strengthened. At a certain point in time, it became difficult to separate the original influence from the practice. In Bourdieu's terms, the disposition became embodied and naturalised (1977, pp. 78-79, 87-95; 1993, pp. 233-234). Hopefully in this process what emerged is something new, a distinctive creative identity that has absorbed influences from the past and applied them in a new context (Holland et. al. 1998, pp. 117-118).

## **Positions**

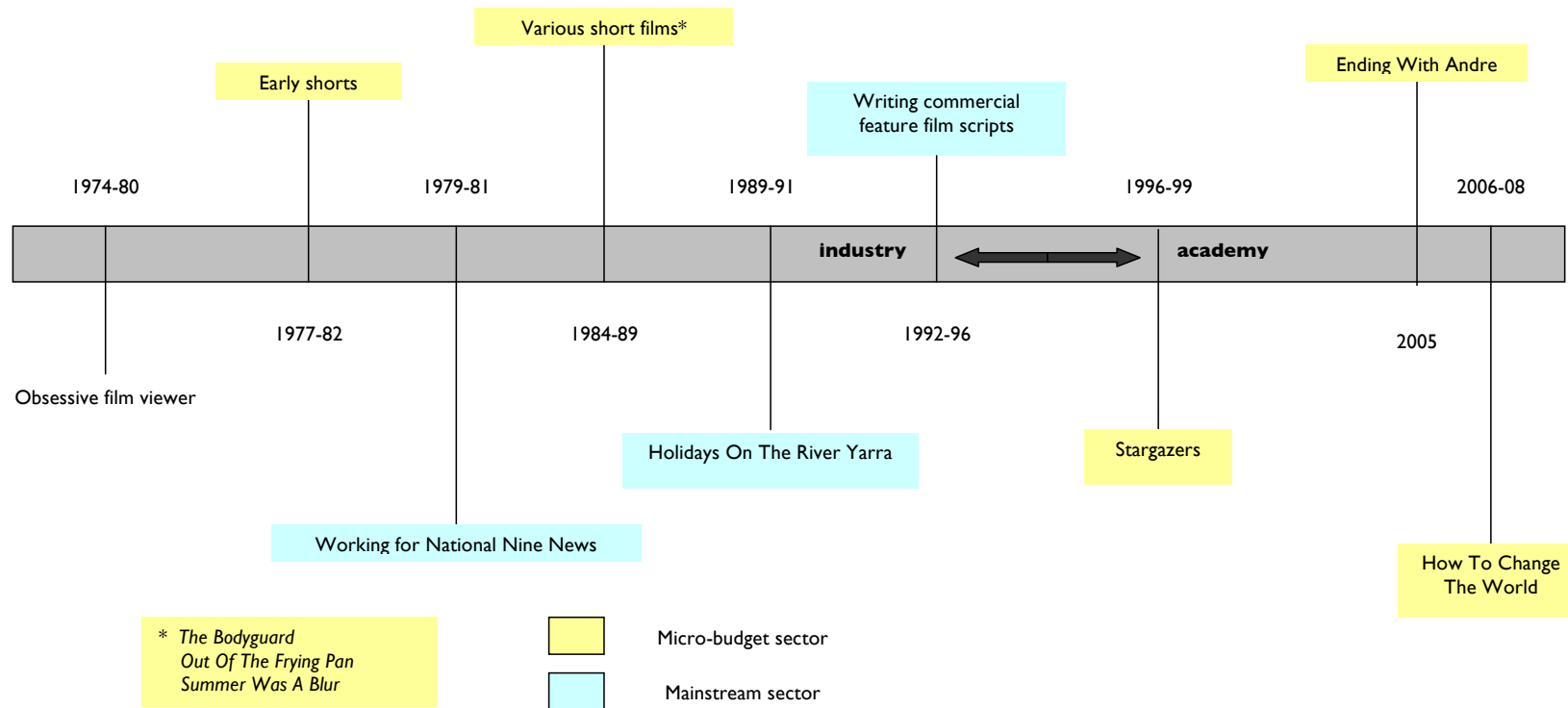
### **A social perspective on screen production practice**

The extent to which my identity as a screen practitioner is influenced by social factors has become increasingly apparent through the research process. To understand my practice, at least in part, means having an understanding of the field in which I am practising. Much of the decision-making involved in the production of *How To Change The World* involved a negotiation between my individual creative and imaginative dispositions and my understanding of the broader social, professional and historical contexts in which I am operating. Unless one views filmmaking solely as a process of self-expression, I would argue that this sense of positioning in relation to the field, on issues such as audience, narrative content, performance style and visual coverage, is a pervasive feature of the screen production process.

Pierre Bourdieu is a theorist whose conceptual framework offers possibilities for meaningfully capturing the specificity and complexity of screen production practice in a social context (1977; 1993; 1998). His concepts offer scope for describing external factors such as the power relationships a person is involved in (family, class, education, race) but also the discretion each individual has to negotiate particular situations through employing their own strategies. Bourdieu's ideas are an attempt to understand practice that is neither 'generated by the explicitly posed *reasons* of an autonomous individual, fully conscious of his or her motivations' (1998, p. viii; italics in original), nor as fully determined by external social forces (such as the way the concept of class is used in some traditional Marxist thought). Bourdieu quite explicitly seeks to break with 'a whole series of socially powerful oppositions – individual/society, individual/collective, conscious/unconscious, interested/disinterested, objective/subjective' (1998, p. viii). What I would like to do in this chapter is to view my work through the application of Bourdieu's concepts to the screen production process, considering to what extent this enables a clearer or more useful sense of my identity and, in particular, my struggle for agency as a filmmaker. In my view, Bourdieu's ideas seem particularly well-suited to this investigation. In critiquing Levi-Strauss's structuralist approach to anthropology and the development of his own concepts in contrast to this, Bourdieu has written 'via habitus, practical sense and strategy, what is reintroduced is agent, action, practice' (1990, pp. 61-62).



## The trajectory of my career



Bourdieu uses the term 'trajectory' to describe the series of positions an individual occupies over time, in relation to the field they are operating in (1993, p. 189). As discussed in the previous section, my practice as a filmmaker emerged from several years of intense film viewing. I was interested in all forms of cinema but, even at that early stage, I was particularly drawn to filmmakers who extended the boundaries of the medium and had distinctive filmmaking identities. It became clear over time that many of the films and filmmakers I admired also operated in the low-budget sphere. This included American commercial filmmakers working in the B movie or exploitation fields (like Sam Fuller, Jacques Tourneur and Roger Corman) and European film movements such as the Italian neo-realists and the French New Wave. It may be that the reduced economic risks involved with low-budget filmmaking allow greater creative freedom and risk-taking. Whatever the case, a low-budget aesthetic was one I was quite comfortable with, including occasionally clumsy acting and uneven production values.

I have tried with my films to express my experience of the world I live in. I have been interested in exploring different ways of doing this. In this respect, it could be said that I have focused on an artistic rather than a commercial perspective in my use of the film medium. However, I am also extremely conscious of the cinema's traditions as a form of mass entertainment and admire a great many works produced in this context. I regard films that can do something new with the medium but also reach an audience as exemplary.

Over the years I have been able to compare the choices I have made with many contemporaries who have had a similar desire to practice as filmmakers. For example, I made a conscious decision to not seek work as a freelance director, on television or commercials, which is one way that others have been able to maintain a career in the screen production industry. I preferred to get work in unrelated jobs and focus on my own personal projects. My conscious motivation for this decision was that I did not like the working culture in these areas of the industry and preferred not to invest creative energy on productions that I did not value. I suspect there were also less conscious motivations to do with my personality and a desire to follow my own creative interests on my own terms, even if that meant practising less frequently as a result.

In terms of Bourdieu's 'two histories' referred to earlier, I could summarise this autobiographical material by saying an examination of the history of my positions and dispositions suggests that my disposition tends towards making my own films on my own terms, influenced by the films I admire, which are often highly respected by film scholars but not otherwise widely known. The positions I have occupied are in the low-budget and no-budget sectors of the field of screen production, and more specifically intellectual and artistic segments of those sectors. However, I think it is important to not view any history of my career as static or free from tensions and contradictions. Bourdieu highlights how the effect of position 'never operates mechanically, and the relationship between positions and *position-takings* is mediated by the dispositions of the agents' (1993, p. 62, italics in original). In my own case, my position-takings can be seen as an evolving process that was partly calculated and partly influenced by a sometimes confused and opportunistic search for work and for the chance to make another film.

At various times I have operated within the mainstream commercial industry. For example, for three years I worked for National Nine News, which was the highest rating television news service in Australia at that time and a large, highly-resourced and very profit-focused media organization. While news is in some respect a quite different form of media production to drama, I believe this experience had quite a significant influence on my personal film practice. While working for Nine News, I was shooting film every working day (and at that stage the news was still shot on 16mm film), often under great pressure of time and circumstance. To some extent, my later interest in improvisation has been supported

by this experience, because it made me quite comfortable with going into any situation and being confident of being able to capture the event on film effectively. The news camera crews also had a 'figured world' (Holland et. al. 1998, p. 41), a set of accepted strategies that were not formally encoded or articulated anywhere but were passed down by senior practitioners to junior ones at appropriate times. These included general principles about how to film and construct a story but also a plethora of tips, to do with everything from handheld camerawork in a range of situations to how to film violent demonstrations.

My most significant experience in this area was the production of *Holidays On The River Yarra*, a low-budget but fully-funded feature film on which I was the writer, director and editor and which was produced within the mainstream professional sector of the industry. Following the relative success of *Holidays On The River Yarra*, I also spent several years writing three more commercial feature film scripts and trying, in collaboration with my producer at the time, to get them financed on the international film industry market. At least one of these films made some progress towards being financed, with interest from an American distributor based on one particular actor agreeing to play the main role. This experience exposed me to the ways of working of the mainstream commercial feature film sector, particularly in relation to scriptwriting and development issues.

I believe making sense of the trajectory outlined above is only possible through an appreciation of the critical position I take in relation to elements of mainstream production practice.

### **Crossing the line: the habitus and my screen production practice**

I am using Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to explain the dynamic and two-way relationship between individuals and the social situations they act in (1977, p. 72; 1980, p. 52-65; 1990, p. 116; 1998, p. 8). I would argue that, for practitioners in the screen production field, there is a well-developed habitus – dispositions to do things in a certain way that are overwhelmingly regarded as natural, critically unexamined and deeply entwined in broader relations of power within society. As an illustration of this from my own experience, in my early development as a filmmaker, when I was still 'naïve' in relation to professional practice, I received a grant from an Australian film funding organization and later applied for additional funding to complete the film. The assessment panel included a prominent television producer who told me I had 'crossed the line'<sup>9</sup> in one scene and would not receive any more funding until I learnt not to make this mistake. Now that I have a highly developed knowledge of this professional convention in shooting and editing screen action I feel confident in saying this editing 'error' was a highly technical one that did not interfere in any way with an audience's appreciation of the scene. Nevertheless, this incident had a powerful effect on me as a filmmaker in developing a sense that there was a professional screen production 'club' that, to join, required doing things a certain way, or what Bourdieu would describe as a 'feel for the game' (1990, pp. 62-3; 1998, pp. 79-81). As I developed as an independent filmmaker, I also gained professional experience. On first working for National

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<sup>9</sup> Not 'crossing the line', also known as the 180 degree rule, is an approach to filming screen action designed to convey a consistent sense of spatial continuity. It commonly applies to two situations: characters facing each other in dialogue, where observing the rule ensures that it always appears as though the characters are looking at each other when close-ups are intercut; and filming a person or object in movement, where observing the rule ensures that the person or object always appears to be moving in the same direction when different shots are intercut. For a detailed explanation of the rule, see Bordwell and Thompson (1993, pp. 262-264).

Nine News as a sound recordist and trainee camera operator, I remember going out with an experienced cameraman to cover a protest march down Swanston Street in Melbourne. He asked me to shoot the event and told me to pick one side of the street and stay there. I could take as many shots as I liked from as many different angles, as long as I didn't cross the road. At first I did not understand why he insisted on this, before realising it was to ensure I never crossed the line.

As my experience in the industry developed, so did my feel for the game and my disposition to recognise crossing the line as awkward and unacceptable, even before being consciously aware of why. When teaching students professional practice, I try to stress that not crossing the line is an industry convention that is commonly treated as a rule but which should more reasonably be regarded as a loose creative guideline. However, when I see crossing the line in a student production (and it occurs in virtually every student production), I instinctively feel uncomfortable, as though something is wrong.

As I will argue elsewhere in this exegesis, the habitus of professional screen production extends well beyond the issue of crossing the line. Managing the issue of continuity is a major component of screen drama production that is beset with principles that determine accepted and acceptable practice, as do the issues of what is appropriate technical quality and execution of craft skills in camera operation, sound recording and lighting. However, there is no aspect of the field where the habitus is stronger than in scripting and script development. In my experience, how the field defines a 'good' story in relation to content, structure, character development and a range of other dramatic issues is narrow and restrictive, even within the more creatively adventurous sectors of the field. However, as Bourdieu is at pains to stress, any field is a site of struggle and the habitus is constantly evolving (1980, pp. 52-65; 1990, p. 116; 1993, p. 30). I would suggest that an example in relation to screen production practice would be the jump cut, which has gone from provoking outrage when used by Jean-Luc Godard in *Breathless* (1959), to becoming a stylistic affectation of rebellious youth culture in the MTV era of music videos in the 1980's, before being entirely normalised through its use in TV commercials and mainstream features at present.

### **Lessons from *How To Change The World*: improvised dialogue**

An example from the production of *How To Change The World* that I feel highlights the tensions at play in relation to the habitus of screen production arose through the use of improvised dialogue, one of the key underlying principles in the film. This was explained to all actors at the casting stage, influenced casting decisions and informed the rehearsal and shooting process. Some of the younger actors, in particular, were very impressive in their ability to invest a scene with dialogue that was consistent with their characters and the situation but also lively, unpredictable and entertaining. However, through the process it became clear that the actors' ability to improvise effectively was variable.

The main character in the film is called Max, who is a seventy year old hotel owner facing the financial reality of having to close his neighbourhood pub. It was not easy to find a talented actor of this age willing to take on such a major role for no money. I approached Reg Gorman, a veteran of Australian television drama, because I was aware he was willing to appear in some student films and I had admired his performances in these. I was very pleased when he agreed to the role. However, it soon became clear that improvisation was not Reg's strength. He was quite willing to attempt it but he appeared uncomfortable. It seemed in conflict with his strengths as a performer. Reg had worked for decades in Australian television drama and was an accomplished professional in this context. This means he had very sophisticated skills in functioning within the highly controlled production model that I was consciously trying to break with in *How To Change The World*. These skills

were essentially around maintaining continuity in his performance across the multiple takes and shots used to construct a scene. He was rightly proud of his ability to be precisely consistent about his gestures, his movements and physical positioning, the tone and timing of his lines, his visual expressions and how all these elements related, over multiple iterations. To some extent, this was the experience I also had with the other older actors that had been cast.

As the shoot progressed, I became increasingly aware that the improvisation sequences with Reg and the older actors were not as productive and not producing material that was as interesting as with the other cast. I felt I needed to make a decision about addressing this issue. But what do you do when your plans are not working out? On the one hand, the project was occurring in a research context where I was specifically trying to take creative risks and explore approaches to production that I would not otherwise attempt. Not all experiments are successful. On the other hand, the production was occurring in other contexts as well. Virtually all the other participants had agreed to get involved on the basis that the film might be a good showcase for their talents, through screenings or as showreel material.<sup>10</sup>



I felt torn between making a film that rigidly applied my pre-existing production ideas and adjusting or abandoning these ideas if more successful results (in terms of audience acceptance) could be achieved with a more pragmatic approach. However, this tension is not really one between principle and pragmatism, or between process and outcome. It is about defining the process in a way that captures the full complexity of the practice. To some extent, my views about this issue reflect my unsatisfactory prior experiences in being unresponsive in similar situations. I have learned that imposing my ideas on people when those ideas are not getting a response is not good process and does not produce good outcomes. I have heard anecdotally of directors achieving great results by imposing their creative vision on their collaborators but this has not been my experience.

At a certain point during the shoot, I adjusted my approach in working with Reg and the other older actors. Whereas with the younger actors the objective was to not rehearse dialogue before the filming of the first take, with the older actors the approach shifted, not towards scripting the dialogue but towards using improvisation as a workshopping technique in rehearsal on set, usually while the crew were setting up. Once the dialogue had been developed and agreed, this formed the basis of the recorded takes. Without the issue being explicitly discussed, this seemed to be an approach with which these actors were more comfortable and produced better results in relation to their performances and the dramatic

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<sup>10</sup> The film *How To Change The World* has had two main forms of public exhibition - as part of the Portable Film Festival for 12 months from August, 2008, where it could be viewed, voted for, downloaded and commented on. It received 9 comments, 31 ratings and 1,561 views ([www.portablefilmfestival.com](http://www.portablefilmfestival.com)). It also screened on free-to-air C31 Melbourne, as part of the TV series 'Cheap Thrills', which showcased Australian micro-budget features. It went to air on Saturday, 30 January 2010 at 10.00pm. The series had a 'peak reach' audience of 24,900. An article about the film written by Jake Wilson was published in The Age newspaper to coincide with the screening: 'Cinema On A Shoestring' (<http://www.theage.com.au/news/entertainment/film/cinema-on-a-shoestring/2010/01/27/1264268021833.html>).

execution of the scene. My own creative response to this problem was to shift my focus in Reg's performance less to his dialogue and more to capturing his face, which to me seemed to be an amazingly expressive object as complex and meaningful as anything any of the other actors said. This problem also focused my thinking on the extent to which it was not only the actors who were improvising. I was also improvising in relation to the production process, adjusting methods and abandoning plans in response to a continually evolving environment.

One of the other instructive things to emerge from this experience was the way it reflected a clash of different and in many ways incompatible professional and creative cultures. The film as a finished work reflects this clash and an often unstated negotiation between the different approaches to come up with a workable result. It cannot be said whether another approach would have produced a better outcome. What can be concluded is that in the creative and social environment of the shoot a complex interaction occurred involving this and many other factors to produce the final result.

### **The space of possibles**

Everyone makes a choice about how long they persevere with a particular direction in their career and their life, relative to the success or failure they perceive they are experiencing. Bourdieu has written about how cultural producers take positions within the field from those that are available, or what he describes as 'the space of possibles' (1993, p. 64). He has made an attempt to outline the subjective elements in defining this space, drawing on concepts such as 'symbolic profit' to highlight the role of expectations and aspirations in motivating people's behaviour. In any individual case, the attraction of a particular opportunity and the extent to which a person will persevere in trying to achieve it is relative to the value they attach to it, with that value being defined not just in economic terms but in terms of prestige and personal satisfaction. Bourdieu stresses that the factors driving behaviour in the field of cultural production extend well beyond financial ones. He sees one of the key features of the field as the distinction between producers who aim at a mass, commercial market and what he calls the sub-field of restricted production (or producing for producers), where there is a reverse economy based on symbolic rather than economic power.

The opposition between the 'commercial' and the 'non-commercial' reappears everywhere. It is the generative principle of most of the judgments which, in the theatre, cinema, painting or literature, claim to establish the frontier between what is and what is not art. (1993, p. 82)

My experience within the film industry is consistent with this analysis. Because film production has traditionally been an expensive medium, requiring a significant investment in technology and personnel to produce what is regarded as an acceptable standard for commercial distribution, there has been an understandable emphasis by investors on producing films that can recoup their investment.

As a medium, there has been an uneasy tension in the history of cinema between its status as entertainment and art. Maltby (2003) has highlighted how the aesthetics of Hollywood filmmaking cannot be understood independently of the film's status as a commercial product. Every level, from story and character to the use of camera, sound, lighting and editing, reflects the film's status as a creative work that is also a commodity (Geuens 2007). In my experience within the professional screen production industry, this tension is often evident on a project through a perceived relationship between filmmaker and audience, or the extent to which creative decisions are influenced by principles of self-expression or audience entertainment. If your creative ideas do not fall within the accepted categories of what will

attract financial support, determined by judgments made about potential audience interest, then until recently the space of possible positions available to you has been quite limited. The screen production industry is not monolithic and there is a spectrum of funding possibilities that vary in the extent to which they require a fully commercial focus. However, I would argue that the financial imperatives in screen production have perhaps made this spectrum narrower than in many other forms of creative practice.

Reflecting on the trajectory of my career, I can identify a significant stage around 1995-96, where I moved away from focusing on writing commercial feature film scripts and embarked on making *Stargazers*, a micro-budget, fully improvised 300 minute drama. This production was a quite conscious rejection of the commercial sphere, reflecting a desire to practice regardless of the budget. In terms of creative outcomes and personal satisfaction, *Stargazers* was a very positive experience. It was a production that I made up as I went along and encouraged me to persevere with both a micro-budget and improvisational approach. The following chapter will explore the issue of micro-budget filmmaking, with a focus on both the creative possibilities and constraints in its practice, discussed in relation to the production of *How To Change The World*.

# CHAPTER 4: MICRO-BUDGET FILMMAKING

## Introduction: an exploratory approach

The previous chapter considered Bourdieu's argument that understanding the practice of a cultural producer requires an understanding of two histories - the history of the positions they have occupied and a history of their dispositions. If this argument is accepted, my arrival at the point in my production career where I made *How To Change The World* can be seen as a significant one. The history of my positions within the field of screen production had led to an increasing interest in an approach to filmmaking that emphasised the process as an exploratory and improvised one.

In contrast, the dominant approach to producing funded or mainstream film and television drama has an emphasis on principles of control over the creative process. Because of the amount of money and the perceived risks involved, particularly at the production stage, a great deal of time and effort is spent in the development of the project. Scripts commonly go through multiple drafts over periods of years, with input from editors, assessors and investors. A key principle in the process is 'tightness', where each scene, line of dialogue and action is interrogated for its contribution to the story. Similarly, during the large-scale intensity of the production stage, processes are organized to provide as much control as possible over the final outcome. Consistency and technical quality are key principles driving the process (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson 1985).

Allied with this is what I would describe as the 'tyranny' of continuity. Continuity is popularly understood outside the film industry as an issue related to props appearing the same way in different shots filmed at different times. However, the principle of continuity pervades almost every aspect of the production process, aiming to achieve the illusion that individual shots within a scene have not been filmed out of sequence and at different times (not uncommonly on different days or weeks) but rather conveying the action of the drama as a seamless real-time experience. Approaches to the design of the coverage (how the action within a scene will be filmed from different angles), lighting, sound and art direction are heavily determined by principles of continuity (Bordwell et. al. 1985, pp. 194-196; Geuens 2000, p. 118). Otherwise successful scenes are commonly discarded in the edit suite because of relatively minor continuity errors. Jean-Pierre Geuens (2000) has written one of very few books that attempt to relate the practical complexities and detail of the film production process to a significant body of contemporary cultural theory and film history. Critiquing the Hollywood model of screen drama and the industrial mode of production associated with it, Geuens discusses how, on a professional production, each shot is commonly lit by at least three or four lights, all of which have an accepted and specific function (2000, pp. 154-157). When the time comes to do a reverse angle, efforts are made to reconcile the contradiction between maintaining a similar lighting style on the person opposite and a consistent look to the overall lighting in the scene, a process that results in the lighting becoming overly complex and time-consuming. Furthermore, to save time during the shoot, which is the most expensive stage of the production, the sequence in which shots are taken is usually determined by the order that minimises the number of different lighting setups, regardless of the impact this has on the needs of the actors or the other creative objectives of the process.

While the presence of a budget allows crew and cast to be paid for their labour and the expertise they bring to their work, the need for investors, producers and broadcasters to get a return on the money invested in the production not only influences issues such as stories and characters but a large number of other issues, from the relations between cast and crew, the style of lighting, camerawork and performance used, the number of takes that



are shot and the design of the coverage. The professional environment in which the production occurs and in which the key participants have been trained and grown experienced creates a disposition towards certain behaviours and ways of working.

Geuens suggests that the key to more fully realising the creative potential of film is in viewing the production stage as an exploratory one, where the focus is less on control and more on the filmmaker being open to what occurs (2000, p. 122–125 & 139–140). His position is supported by Sainsbury (2003a; 2003b), who has been critical of the conservatism of the Australian film industry and what he describes as ‘pragmatic’ filmmaking, stressing the need for the production to be a process of discovery, rather than the mechanical visual realization of the script:

The experience of watching a pragmatic film is to feel that the tools of cinema have been commandeered and enslaved by something that demands a rigorous obedience and forbids all but the most minor show of independence. The something is, of course, the script. (Sainsbury, 2003a, p. 8)

In chapter 6 of this document, I will be focusing on the role of improvisation in the production of *How To Change The World*, and the extent to which a production process can produce worthwhile results if it is less focused on control exercised through the script. At this stage, however, I would like to consider how making films with little or no money may influence a more exploratory approach to the process.

## **What is micro-budget production?**

The traditionally close connections in screen production between commercial and creative factors has started to break down in the era of digital technology. The historical barriers to screen production imposed by expensive materials, equipment and facilities have lowered significantly (Blumenthal & Goodenough 2006, pp. 204–206). This has seen the increasing emergence of what can be described as a micro-budget production sector that, in theory, could allow greater possibilities for experimentation and innovation, without the commercial imperatives for the screen work to reach a sizeable audience and provide a profitable return for investors.<sup>11</sup>

Munt (2006), in his discussion of the film *Ten* (2002) by Abbas Kiarostami, examines the narrative and aesthetic directions that ‘Digital-Micro-Cinema’ lends itself to, many of which are features of *How To Change The World*, from an engagement with the everyday world to the use of unscripted dialogue and an approach to storytelling using hybrid fiction/non-fiction segments. He also links Digital-Micro-Cinema to earlier stages in film history such as Italian Neo-realism and the French New Wave, where developments in new technology led to a rise in new approaches to filmmaking.

*How To Change The World* was designed as a micro-budget production, defined in this case as a production where the only money spent was on catering and locations. Micro-budget

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<sup>11</sup> Recent examples of the growth in micro-budget film activity can be seen in DigiSPAA, an annual competition organised by the Screen Producers Association of Australia that focuses on low-budget digital features: <http://www.digispaa.org.au/about-digispaa-2/>; Microwave, a 2011 symposium on micro budget filmmaking symposium held in Sydney: <http://www.creativeinnovation.net.au/Community/Events/Microbudget-filmmaking-symposium.html>; and Microfilmmaker Magazine: <http://www.microfilmmaker.com/tipstrick/Issue9/preprod.html>

production of this sort has always been a feature of the screen production industries. It has traditionally been conceived of as a legitimate area for emerging and trainee filmmakers to gain experience and credits on their way to establishing mainstream careers but has rarely had any broader status or significance. I believe the changes in the production sector driven by an increase in micro-budget activity suggest this area is worthy of greater attention and its potential as a site for innovation and experimentation should be explored.

My initial experience in micro-budget production was consistent with its conventional status as a training ground for emerging filmmakers. What is less usual is the way I have returned to this sector later in my career. Given my dispositions to make films that would struggle to attract financing within the commercial sector of the field, the micro-budget sector could be seen as offering possible positions where I could practice. Integrating the micro-budget sector within the research context, with the objective of making a film that takes considered creative and production process risks, has been the logic behind the production of *How To Change The World*.

The micro-budget sector offers the opportunity to make a film with a degree of creative freedom. It is also a field thick with constraints and compromises. The lack of resources has an impact on virtually every aspect of the production – the range and experience of the people available to work on the film, the time available to make it, the technology that can be used, the content and style of the story that can be told and many other issues. With people working as volunteers they can rightly be considered as collaborators rather than professionals-for-hire, which changes the nature of the working relationships. My research findings from making *How To Change The World* as a micro-budget film are that the environment is a highly contested one, creatively, socially and technologically. Outcomes are commonly the result of negotiating between multiple competing priorities, involving creative objectives and practical constraints within a complex collaborative environment.

In the following pages, I would like to highlight the knowledge I have gathered about the practice of micro-budget screen production through the making of *How To Change The World*. Drawing on my earlier discussions about practical knowledge and the social dimensions of filmmaking, this discussion will highlight the contested nature of the process. I do not believe these tensions are isolated to the micro-budget field. In my experience they are a feature of many forms of screen production but are in some respects intensified through the lack of resources in this area.

## **Micro-budget production and symbolic capital**

There are numerous ethical issues involved in making a film where people are contributing their labour and talent for no money. There are also significant pragmatic difficulties in shooting a production of any length and complexity using accepted professional techniques, when cast and crew have to pursue other means of financial support. Successfully resolving these issues in a principled way was a key objective of the production but required the producers to improvise at the organisational level to an extent that paralleled and sometimes seemed to exceed the improvisational efforts of the actors.

Film and television production is an intensely collaborative activity. On a micro-budget production, the process of finding cast and crew who have the expertise, commitment and available time to devote to the production can be extremely challenging. In my research, my inability to pay people for their labour was not a primary factor in their motivation to be involved but it did affect the extent to which they could commit to the production.

Bourdieu (1984; 1993) has discussed the concept of symbolic capital that exists within the

field of cultural production. His use of the concept is focused on notions of prestige, respectability and 'a reputation for competence' (1984, p. 291) within a particular field. In my research there were similar exchanges of value occurring amongst the participants in the production that were not financial. In relation to the crew, most of the people I approached were students or recent graduates from media production courses. They saw an involvement in my production as offering them an opportunity to gain experience in roles that would help them establish themselves within the professional sector of the film and television industry - in Bourdieu's terms, increase their symbolic capital within the field. On a micro-budget production, a talented but inexperienced crew member can have creative opportunities and a level of input into the creative aspects of the production that would not be possible in the professional environment. In this context, the production was offering them an experience that they perceived as valuable to them – whether it was creative experience that allowed them to develop new skills or showcase existing ones. In return they offered their time, labour and expertise.

While many actors were also motivated by perceived future professional opportunities, it also seemed the creative satisfaction of practising their craft on a worthwhile project was more prominent in their decision to participate. As an example, one of the main female actors on the production was Australian-born but with Indian parents. Despite obvious acting ability and some significant prior experience, she described how difficult it was for her to get any major roles because of her Indian appearance and the reluctance of agents and producers to cast her in other than supporting roles. So involvement in this production provided her with an opportunity to break out of the professional stereotyping she had experienced, an opportunity that offset the lack of financial compensation.

The argument I am proposing about symbolic capital in this area is supported by my experience in relation to the participation of minor crew members and actors (bit players and extras in the film). I found that it was consistently easier to find people for the major roles (despite this involving a greater commitment of time and effort on the part of the participant) than the minor ones. In the more significant roles, the production could offer creative satisfaction and experience valuable in the development of a professional career. However, in the minor roles, there was much less on offer and hence much less perceived value in being involved. Unaware of this at the planning stage, I structured the production to focus less on a few major roles and more on a larger range of less substantial ones, working on the assumption that it would require less time commitment from any one participant. Despite this, in the end, more time was spent in securing the involvement of extras than was spent in casting the main roles.

### **When worlds collide: different career trajectories**

One of my motivations for working within the micro-budget space was because of the possibilities for creative risk-taking, both in relation to the types of stories told and the production techniques used. The emphasis on privileging improvised performances within a production process that was in most respects structured along professional lines was a focus of the project. This meant if a first take was good for performances but had some sound, lighting or camera operating problems, I was reluctant to do it again. On most professional productions, these blemishes in the execution of the audio-visual aspects of the production would nearly always be addressed. I became aware that privileging performances in this way was creating tensions with the crew, who were not happy to have what they perceived as flaws in their work uncorrected and potentially visible or audible in the final film.

Consistent with Bourdieu's theories, one way to analyse this situation would be to focus on the collaborative context and say that there is a conflict between what he describes as the trajectories of the participants, or the histories of their position takings (1993, p.189). All of

the crew I was working with were in the early stages of their career. Many of them were motivated to be involved in the production through the desire to produce work that would be a good showcase of their abilities within the professional production sector. This sector emphasises certain qualities that I was specifically giving less priority to. This tension in the production process had to be sensitively managed and involved some compromises on my part. To me, it is an example of the social and collaborative complexity of the creative screen production process, which cannot be adequately understood if the focus is only on the ideas and identity of the director.

## **An economy of goodwill**

A distinctive feature of the micro-budget screen production sector is its ambiguous status in relation to previous understandings of 'professional' and 'amateur' in this field. A number of writers have highlighted an increasing blurring of the distinction between professional and amateur as a feature of the media in the digital era and argued it offers opportunities for greater diversity in perspectives and practices. Leadbeater and Miller (2004), in their work on 'pro-ams', have highlighted the scale of activity within contemporary post-industrial societies of people who do amateur work to a professional standard, in diverse fields ranging from astronomy to computer games. They have also highlighted the often symbiotic relationships in many fields between the activities of paid and unpaid participants. The extensive discussion within internet studies about the role of 'prosumers' and 'producers' also provides evidence of the blurring between the professional and non-professional in online networked environments that is occurring in fields such as journalism, advertising and media (Deuze 2005; Bruns 2005; Humphreys, Fitzgerald, Banks & Suzor 2005). While there are clear tensions in these developments between perceiving them as enhancing participatory media practice or increasing commercial exploitation of media users, I would suggest that this phenomenon is significant and relevant to the field of micro-budget screen production. However, I would also argue that it raises important ethical issues that micro-budget producers need to address. In producing a drama program with unpaid labour, the position I took was to be as explicit and equitable as possible. Agreements were signed with all participants that the production was a non-commercial one and that if the resulting program earned income then they had the right to be paid for their contribution. This is standard practice within the micro-budget sector of the film and television industry. However, I also felt it was important to take less formal steps to ensure that all participants felt that basic ethical principles were underpinning the process.

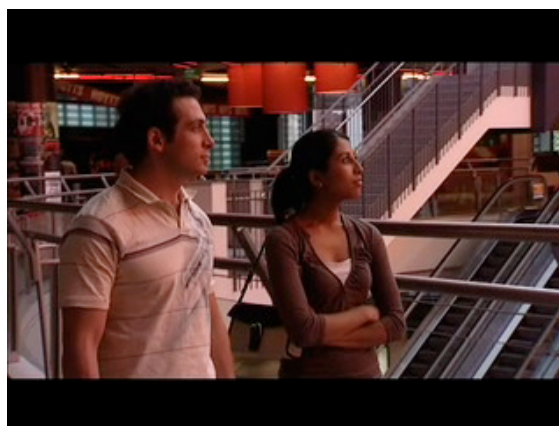
My research suggests that a sustained micro-budget shoot requires many attributes commonly associated with professional productions – effective communication, a reasonable working environment and reliable planning – combined with a respect for the contribution of all participants, regardless of their experience, for even at the micro-budget end of the field, there is a hierarchy of status and reputation involved. It became clear that this production was operating in an ill-defined space between professional and amateur. The production of *How To Change The World* involved an uncommonly long shooting period, fourteen days spread over five weeks for the main shoot. This was a conscious decision, designed to avoid the extremely long daily hours that are characteristic of micro-budget productions, so all days were scheduled at eight hours with thirty minutes for a meal break. However, extending the shoot over this number of days created significant obstacles for anyone to participate in the entire shoot, even if they had favourable material circumstances and a commitment to the project. With a couple of exceptions, I had to accept that even quite important crew roles had to be swapped and rotated, with this occurring more frequently as the production proceeded. However, I viewed this as a creative price that had to be paid, as it was an important objective of the project to model an ethical approach within this production environment where participants were exchanging their labour for creative and professional opportunities.

While this ambitious shooting period was fraught with potential disasters, it ultimately ran surprisingly smoothly. In addition to an exchange of labour for creative and professional opportunities, my research indicated there was another exchange of symbolic capital occurring on the production, in relation to what could be termed an economy of goodwill<sup>12</sup>. This economy was based on a culture of respect and fairness that I felt was necessary to support the production process in a micro-budget environment. Creating such a culture is easier to assert than to implement in practice, given the large and diverse range of people involved, with equally diverse pressures and objectives at play. An example of the pressures in relation to fairness was around the issue of payment to individuals. On a micro-budget production, where there is an explicit agreement that participants will not be paid, the issue of expenses and differential treatment for individuals can create feelings of inequity and adversely affect the culture within the production. I would argue that a shoot like this is only viable if the creative production group can operate in an environment that is relatively cohesive and free of conflict, so an equitable approach had to be maintained, despite considerable pressures to act otherwise.

### **The practice of micro-budget production: the shot tower scene**

In this next section I will examine a scene in *How To Change The World*, to highlight the practice of micro-budget production and the interplay between competing priorities in the process, including some of those discussed above. I believe a discussion grounded in the actual practice of an individual scene will clarify the complex way that creative, social, logistical and technical factors are often interwoven in this environment.

I refer to this as the *shot tower* scene (00:41:58; DVD2 Item 1<sup>13</sup>), named after the location where it was shot. The scene involves the lead female character (Jazz) going shopping with a man she has just met (Pete).



Still from the *shot tower* scene: take one

This was not an exceptional scene in any particular way. In fact, in relation to the creative objectives I had for the production, I had set myself the goal of coming up with inventive ways to shoot improvised dialogue and this was done in a way I was trying to avoid, which is

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<sup>12</sup> I used this term in my research diary of 17 August 2006 to describe how the production was being 'financed'.

<sup>13</sup> References to video excerpts on DVD2 specify an item number that is matched on the DVD's menu.

a handheld two-shot. The plan was to shoot the entire scene in one uninterrupted take. The actors knew what their character's objectives were. They were asked to get across a few key points about their relationship and the plot. As with the whole shoot, if a second take or closer angle were required the actors were told to just play the scene again without trying to duplicate individual lines or actions. Dialogue was not written down.

This scene was not rehearsed prior to the shooting stage and there was not a full run-through before the first take. There were concerns about running out of time (it was the last scene of a long day) and the level of background noise. On the first take, a number of issues were immediately apparent (DVD2 Item 1a). The actors positioned themselves further apart than either the camera operator or I anticipated. Particularly at the start of the take, the female character moves partially out of frame on several occasions. The microphone also appeared quite noticeably in the top of the frame on a couple of occasions. Offsetting this, I was impressed by the performances. The take captured the characters and their relationship at this stage in the story, the dialogue the actors came up with was expressive and the performances had the fresh and unpredictable quality of doing something for the first time, a quality I was particularly interested in capturing on this production. Furthermore, the 'mistake' in the actors positioning themselves so far apart immediately struck me as an excellent visual representation for what is going on dramatically in the scene: even though they are attracted to each other, there are fundamental differences between the two characters that they are not going to be able to resolve.

### *Authorial intention and control*

From the perspective of a filmmaker, authorial intentions are central to an understanding of the production process, as well as how those intentions are transformed during their implementation. While screen production is a fundamentally collaborative process, in most cases cast and crew look to the director for a coherent creative approach to the recording of each shot. With this film, there were overarching strategies to the production that were being applied as much as possible. These included the use of improvised dialogue and an approach to shooting and covering the action to support effective performances in this context, such as minimal lighting, the use of extended takes and a reluctance to shoot many alternative angles. In the case of the *shot tower* scene, a lack of communication that resulted in what might otherwise be regarded as a 'mistake' had produced a good creative outcome within the context of the production. While a relatively small example, I think this incident highlights broader issues around the concept of authorial control in relation to screen production. It is an illustration of the gap that, in my experience, often occurs between directorial intention and the executed outcome, where a complex range of large and small intervening factors either enhance, impede or otherwise influence the work. In the micro-budget environment, I would argue it is more likely that intervening factors will affect the execution of the director's plans. In my view, it is wise to have an aesthetic strategy that accounts for this.

### *Cast and crew dynamics*

In my experience, there is a fundamental tension in the screen production process between the needs of the crew and the cast that has not been sufficiently discussed or analysed. When I say this, I am not referring to issues that can be resolved through effective or improved collaboration. Even with the best working relationships possible between individuals in the production team, the environments required for each group to produce their best work rarely if ever coincide. From the point of view of a director seeking to fully realise the creative potential of the performers and the production crew, it is almost impossible to get a satisfactory outcome. In my experience, directors follow a path where

both areas are compromised to a limited extent, or else go strongly in one direction at the expense of the other.

I would argue that the optimum environment for actors is for the technical demands on them to be kept to a minimum. Unusual camera angles, complex lighting and ambitious camera movements require time to set up and impose constraints on actors in terms of their positioning and the timing of their performances. They have to hit marks and hit them at the right time. Challenging camera, sound and lighting setups often result in errors in execution by the crew that then require the performance to be repeated or fragmented. Up to a point, talented actors can deal with these constraints without a noticeable impact but it is nevertheless limiting and distracting. In my experience, very few directors have successfully resolved this tension and achieved both sophisticated visuals and spontaneous performances (Jean Renoir and Martin Scorsese are two of very few that come to mind).

This issue was one that was at the forefront of my thinking throughout the shoot and one that I was quite specifically experimenting with and trying to resolve. It could be seen as what Schön describes as a series of move-testing experiments (1983, p. 146). Throughout the film I was trying to avoid the common strategy of shooting improvised dialogue using a hand-held two-shot and in other scenes came up with creative visual alternatives. However, with this shot, I had exhausted my novel ideas for coverage and adopted a more conventional approach. I was nevertheless concerned to make sure the camera and sound crews felt their creative, technical and professional needs were being addressed. In the micro-budget environment, this was particularly important, as the crew were only participating for the opportunity the production offered in developing their expertise. In this case, after the first take, the camera operator was understandably dissatisfied with how the shot was executed – in relation to the framing at the start, the actors being on the edges of the frame and the microphone being in shot. Even though I was happy with the performances in the first take and was reluctant to ask the actors to do it again, we decided to do another take to address these problems. The second take was much better in relation to framing and technical execution but the performances lacked the improvisational qualities of the first take (DVD2 Item 1b).



Still from the *shot tower* scene: take two

At the editing stage, the question then arose as to which of these two takes to use.



### *The 'positioning' of the film*

Bourdieu maintains that all cultural producers take a position within their field, with one of the main issues being their relation to the audience: in simple terms, whether they are making works for a mass commercial audience or an audience of their peers (or what he describes as producing for producers) (1993, p. 50, pp. 115-120). With this research, I was interested in exploring the position I was taking in relation to the field of screen production, and the extent to which both macro and micro decisions I made in the process were determined by this position-taking. I explicitly took some positions contrary to mainstream professional practice. The film's status as a research project, its micro-budget circumstances and my own personal creative interests influenced this position-taking, which in turn informed my decision in this as well as countless other situations. If I had been aiming this film at a mass audience, take one would probably not have been regarded as usable, or else only in parts: the various camera and sound problems would have been considered too significant. Yet if take two had been used, the performances in the finished film would have been diminished in subtle but important ways. However, having made the decision that take one was the preferred option, there were still obstacles to using it.

### *Changing technology and micro-budget production*

Microphones in shot are common in screen production and probably more common on low budget shoots with rushed schedules and less experienced crews. They are a common reason for shooting another take. With enough coverage you can sometimes edit around a microphone in shot. However, advances in post-production technology have made it increasingly possible to effectively remove microphones, through masking and painting tools. This is much easier to achieve when the take is a fixed frame or at least shot off a tripod. In the case of take one in the shot we are considering, it was handheld, which means every frame of the take was in a slightly different position and any mask covering the microphone would have to be animated to change 25 times a second.

Because of my desire to use this take, I decided to attempt to remove the microphone in post-production using a widely available visual effects program. Somewhat to my surprise, I achieved effective results after about three hours work.



Left: Take one with microphone in shot

Right: Same frame with microphone removed

What is significant to me is the knowledge that five years ago this would have only been possible with a significant budget to go to a high-end facility using expensive technology and



skilled operators. Now it can be done with readily accessible software usable on a desktop computer.

This example illustrates one of the key issues in the emergence of a micro-budget production sector, where easy access to low-cost, high-quality technology allows a much greater range of work to be produced and where the previously clear boundaries between professional and non-professional work are being significantly blurred. To me, it also illustrates the issue of to what extent an evaluation of a screen production can be made by viewing the final work. Like many creative practices with a strong craft component, in many cases the successful execution of the process is to make the achievement invisible in the final outcome (DVD2 Item 1d). While this is a simple and rather technical example, in my experience some of my most significant achievements as a filmmaker have not been apparent in the final film but reflect an ability to produce acceptable work that doesn't reveal the limited resources and difficult circumstances under which it has been produced. While it is widely accepted that the achievement of a screen work can be assessed by viewing the final outcome, I would argue that, particularly when the research is looking at the production process, an evaluation of that research should also consider the process.

## Conclusion

My objective in the final section of this chapter has been to provide a grounded and relevant exploration of the question: why is this film the way it is? I chose the *shot tower* scene to examine not because of its qualities of excellence but because it was characteristic of the competing tensions at play during the execution of creative plans on a micro-budget production. The constant interplay that occurred between plans and execution was consistent with Schön's characterisation of reflective practice (Schön 1983, pp. 163-166). What was increasingly apparent as I analysed the details of my own practice were the parallels I was also able to draw with my interest in the concept of improvisation. The shifting negotiations, the unexpected developments, the messy compromises and the moments of inspiration needed to realise a creative idea in the micro-budget screen production environment had many of the features I was familiar with from directing improvised performances, features I will explore in detail in chapter 6.

The central question this research is focused on concerns the transformation of a creative practice into a research practice. In relation to this, I believe that the possibilities the micro-budget sector offers of participating in and critiquing the screen production process make it a worthwhile environment in which to undertake reflective practice research. My experiences in micro-budget production, earlier in my career and particularly with *How To Change The World*, highlight the potential of this sector as a space within the field of screen production where creative risks can be taken and new possibilities explored. The expense of the screen production process presents a significant barrier to developing a research practice in this field. While care needs to be taken in correlating production experiences in the micro-budget sector with those that occur within a fully professional environment, I believe there are still many aspects of the process that can be meaningfully researched, irrespective of the material and financial limitations of the form. In the next chapter, the focus will continue on the complex pressures within the immediacy of a screen production shoot, concentrating on the concept of agency.

## CHAPTER 5: AGENCY - BEYOND SCRAMBLING

### Agency within the moment of practice

Screen production is intensely 'in the moment' during the shooting stage, the relatively short but crucial stage when nearly all the human and technological resources of the production are deployed to capture the required visual and aural material with which to later construct the screen work. On *How To Change The World*, there were over ninety people directly involved in the shoot, either in front of or behind the camera. This number does not include all the people who were involved in locations, catering, props and equipment supplies, who needed to be organised so that the production could proceed effectively. Because of the intensity and significance of the shooting stage, it is usually premised on extensive planning, with a view to executing the creative intentions of the writer, director, designer and other key collaborators as quickly and efficiently as possible. It draws on communication, collaboration and technical/craft qualities from all the crew and cast. For the director, it is often a time of great pressure when they are called on to make countless decisions, often with significant consequences, and with little or no scope for reflection.

As a director, during this research and prior to it, how I make these decisions in this situation has been a subject of great interest to me. I have come to conceive of this issue within the framework of what I describe as 'the moment of practice'. I find this term useful because it captures the key features of what I believe is my biggest challenge as a director in the screen production process: how to perform well in this transitory space which is experienced over and over and where I seek to express my creative and conceptual ideas in a short period of time that is social, ephemeral, tactical, linear and practical in both a material and technological sense.

During the making of *Holidays On The River Yarra*, a low-budget but fully professional production on which I was the writer and director, the shooting of one particular scene left me with a strong memory in relation to this issue (DVD2 Item 7). On this film, we were often shooting under great pressure of time. On a particular night, we had to shoot a critical scene on Princes Bridge, in Swanston Street in the heart of Melbourne, then a second scene in a pizza parlour in Lygon Street, Carlton, before doing a final street scene in Footscray. Unsurprisingly, the Princes Bridge scene, involving complex outdoor lighting and the need to wrestle with pedestrian control and noise from trams, trains and traffic, took longer than scheduled. We got to the pizza parlour needing to shoot the scene in about one hour instead of three. While I had done a large amount of pre-planning around coverage and visual style on this film, under the relentless pressure of a long shoot, this scene was one I had not been able to work on. The scene was predominantly a dialogue between three actors sitting at a table eating pizza. I vividly remember being asked by the first assistant director, the director of photography and others, how I wanted to shoot the scene. Summing up the situation, I said something like 'let's shoot it like a soap opera'. By this I meant using the conventional approach to coverage employed on most television drama (and many films), which works when there is no particular interest in visual style and the imperative is to cover the scene quickly and efficiently, with the confidence that it will be able to be put together at the editing stage (one of the most pressing objectives in coverage decisions). The approach usually involves an establishing shot, then reverse angle master takes of the main characters in the scene, in mid-shot or medium close-up, with a close up if there are any dramatic moments.

I have always felt a sense of failure about this experience. The lesson I took from it at the time was, if I wanted to do something distinctive, that reflected my creative ideas as a filmmaker, I had to work it out in advance. If I needed to perform in the moment, I would

revert to a deeply ingrained, conventional way of covering scenes that is seen in 'the hack work every day of the week on television screens around the world' (Crittenden 1981, p. 25). Later, I felt this response avoided the problem rather than addressing it. The challenge is how, in the pressure cooker environment of the shoot, in the moment of practice, you can make creative decisions that do not default to the conventional ways of doing things. Put another way, how can you act with agency in this situation, how can you assert your individual creative identity as a filmmaker? In conceptualising this question, I have found the writing of Bourdieu and Schön provides some guidance.

I think Bourdieu would see the way I defaulted to conventional coverage during the shoot of *Holidays On The River Yarra* as evidence of the habitus at work. In the pressure of the moment, within the practical and cultural context of the shooting of a feature film, not only I but all the other crew were able to quickly get the scene shot in a way that would cut together in the edit room, through drawing on a common and largely internalised sense of what was required within the professional screen production industry.

Since *Holidays On The River Yarra*, my creative interests as a filmmaker have moved increasingly towards an improvised approach to the shooting stage, which in many respects exacerbates the challenges I have outlined. However, it is also clear that greater experience in dealing with these issues has resulted in what I would regard as better outcomes. I have previously said that in the moment of practice there is no time for reflection. However, it would be more accurate to say this refers to 'reflection' in the commonly understood sense of the word. Schön uses the concept of 'reflection-in-action' to describe how professionals deal with similar situations where they display 'artistry in situations of uniqueness and uncertainty' (1983, p. 165). It could be said that what I am trying to achieve through this research is a better understanding of how to develop this artistry in my own practice. In the context of the discussion in this chapter, the word *agency* could be exchanged for Schön's use of *artistry*.

In Schön's terms, this artistry 'hinges on the range and variety of the repertoire' that a practitioner brings to unfamiliar or unique situations (ibid., p. 140), allowing them 'to make sense of their uniqueness' and not reducing them 'to instances of standard categories' (ibid., p. 140). Schön sees repertoire-building as occurring through both reflection-in-action and through reflective research undertaken 'outside the immediate context of practice' (ibid., p. 309), although he cautions that in this latter case care should be taken to capture the 'evolution of inquiry' and avoid 'a view of the case which arose only at the end of inquiry' from seeming to have been available from the beginning (ibid., p. 317). It was clear from my reflective material how frequently I was drawing on a repertoire of past experience in developing ideas and dealing with difficult situations during the production of *How To Change The World*. In my case, the influence of films I have seen is very significant and has already been discussed. In many cases they seem to be inextricably entangled with the practice and I believe cannot be meaningfully separated from it.

Bourdieu also highlights the importance of the past in the moment of practice, expressing it through the phrase 'the six figures already dialled on the telephone are present in the seventh' (1993, p. 60), although his relational theory has a greater focus than Schön's on how individual practitioners position themselves through their practice with reference to each other. Bourdieu acknowledges that his theory of cultural production is a radical contextualisation and that a complete application of his theories to any specific moment of practice 'is difficult to perform in practice and in some cases impossible' (ibid., p. 65), involving as it does the identification of dispositions and perceptions in individual agents. While accepting the theoretical limits of achieving a complete understanding of my practice using this approach, within the context of this exegesis I still believe an identification of the key factors at work is worth undertaking. It could be seen that practitioner research involving self-reflection is one situation where this identification process is more possible

than others. To some extent, it would also seem to me that this undertaking provides a validation of the research process, as in other contexts it is unlikely that the thorough and detailed analysis of past experience required would be undertaken.

## **Scrambling**

My research journal on 27 October 2006, in the middle of the production of *How To Change The World*, makes reference to 'a lot of scrambling'. This was an attempt in the early stages of my research to describe the process of laying plans and then having to change them, often at the last minute or in the moment of execution, either because of external factors or because I made the judgment they were not working. I am well aware that this is a facet of most screen production projects (and indeed most practical projects involving human beings). However, in my experience, it is exacerbated within the micro-budget sphere and particularly on a larger-scale project like *How To Change The World* became a very significant feature of the experience.

Scrambling could be seen as a concept that captures the tensions I experienced in the moment of practice, struggling as a filmmaker within the complex social and material environment of an improvised micro-budget production to create a work that reflects my dispositions within the current position I have taken in the field. The key feature of scrambling is the adjustment of plans when they are inconsistent with the practice situation. In many cases, this conflict between plans and execution was very illuminating. It is not easy, I believe, to generalise about a pattern to this process, apart from saying it reflects Schön's 'conversation with the situation' (1983, pp. 163-166) and the desire, on my part as the practitioner, to develop greater agency in handling these situations.

I would now like to explore a range of examples from the production of *How To Change The World* that highlight the issues dealt with so far in this text, issues that have been discussed separately but which are intricately entangled within the contested and contradictory nature of the moment of screen production practice. My aim is to convey how these examples express something significant about my identity as a filmmaker, how the history of my dispositions and position-takings within the field of screen production informs the 'scrambling' quality of the production, and how a deeper understanding of this process may assist my struggle for agency as a creative practitioner.

## **Example 1: Visual strategies**

In the months leading up to the shoot for *How To Change The World*, when I was talking to my co-producers, production designers and director of photography about my creative plans for the film, I gave a lot of thought to developing and communicating ideas about how the narrative and thematic objectives of the film could be translated into the lighting, camerawork and art direction. These plans can be found in Appendix 3. From my point-of-view, I was very happy with the ideas I developed. To me, they were visually expressive and would creatively enhance the film as a work of art. I would also regard myself as sufficiently experienced in this form of production to judge whether or not they were practically workable. However, within the scramble of the shoot, I finished up almost entirely abandoning these ideas. In one way, this disappointed me, but in another, I feel it reflected something significant about the circumstances of the shoot.

The camera operating plans were the easiest to implement. I developed different strategies for different characters. For what the production team described as 'Max's story', that part of the narrative involving the pub owner, the plan was to increase the degree of camera movement as his story unfolded, to reflect Max's increasing movement from passive to

active in his response to his problems. So you can see in one of the opening scenes ('Norm's stroke' 00:02:29) there is virtually no camera movement and in one of his final scenes ('Fussy customers' 01:06:59) there is constant movement. However, the strategies involving lighting were harder to achieve. Lighting is often the most time-consuming part of the shoot and it became clear that, with limited equipment, crew and time, it was not sustainable to make these extra creative demands. In my judgment, the result would have been scheduling delays, with cast and crew frustration to the point where the process could have broken down.

My analysis of what occurred was that the level of control I had to exert over proceedings to execute these plans was in most respects incompatible with the other forces at work in the production, such as the amount of time involved, the amount of money available, the experience and goodwill of the participants and, most importantly, the improvisational aspects of the performances. An analysis of the practice could suggest that the design and attempted implementation of these visual plans was a misjudgement on my part, although one of my key objectives with the production was to attempt to combine improvisational performances with expressive visuals and the judgment was made in that context.

This experience could be seen as a further example of my 'conversation with the situation' (Schön 1983, pp. 163-166) and making adjustments to develop a creatively productive environment within the unique circumstances of this shoot. It also highlights the complexities involved in defining an individual filmmaker's identity within an intensely collaborative environment and the social character of the process.

In some respects it could be said that the disappointing outcome in this situation was a result of my dispositions running into conflict with my current position. The influence of films I have seen is very strong and quite embedded in my creative personality. The history of my position-takings was such that, after the experience making *Stargazers* (1999), I was excited by the possibilities of improvisation but wanted to explore ways in which this approach to performance could be integrated with a more expressive use of the visual side of filmmaking. However, this use was often informed by my knowledge of earlier films that had influenced me but which, in most cases, were made under quite different circumstances from the ones I was dealing with on *How To Change The World*. On another level, it is perhaps inappropriate to be disappointed with the outcomes in this situation. The limited implementation of my preconceived visual strategies was simply a matter of prioritising other elements of the production in the moment of practice. There were also numerous occasions where I was able to achieve the broader objective of combining improvisation with expressive visuals to my satisfaction, for example, in the *bar scene* where Jazz gets drunk (00:45:57), which will be discussed in the following chapter.

## **Example 2: the pub customers**

An example from *How To Change The World* that in many ways did not turn out as well as I hoped, despite a great deal of effort and thought on my part, was the component of the film the production team referred to as the 'pub customer' sequences. This was always part of the original design of the production and involved inviting a large number of non-actors to appear in the film, drinking at the bar or at tables, talking about a diverse range of topics typical of a pub conversation – stories of the everyday, personal anecdotes and discussions about politics and world affairs. My motivation to have this component as part of the film was based on the belief that part of the habitus of screen production is to privilege the visual. In what is an audio-visual medium, this privileging can possibly be traced to the beginnings of cinema as a purely visual medium, then the later reaction of cinema to the emergence of television as a media competitor by stressing big screen spectacle (Bolter & Grusin 1999). However, over the years, both as a viewer and a filmmaker, I have come to

realise that some of my best experiences in both film and television have been watching (and listening to) conversations. Hollywood cinema in the years prior to television often featured dialogue scenes as a large part of the narrative. As an example, one of my favourite Hollywood films is *Angel Face* (1952), directed by Otto Preminger, a film that is overwhelmingly constructed from dialogue scenes, apart from two brief but extreme moments of violence.



*Angel Face* (1952)

Another very influential film in my personal canon is *The Mother and The Whore* (Jean Eustache 1973), a four-hour film heavily focused on three characters that is almost entirely made up of long dialogue sequences. The more high profile work of Eric Rohmer is also relevant in this context.



*The Mother and The Whore* (1973)

In my own practice, I began attempting to design a narrative around extended dialogue in *Summer Was A Blur* (1989) but it was with *Stargazers* (1999)<sup>14</sup> that I undertook a more

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<sup>14</sup> Because of its length and experimental nature, *Stargazers* has only had limited opportunities to be exhibited. It was screened in three feature-length instalments at the Kino Dendy Cinemas, on May 10, 2005, as part of the Melbourne Underground Film Festival (see <http://www.muff.com.au/2005/content/avant.html>). It has also been written about by Jake Wilson, current film critic for The Age newspaper and former co-editor of Senses of Cinema, in his review of the year 2003.

The very best Australian work I saw, however, and one of my personal highlights of the year, was Leo Berkeley's *Stargazers*, a 5-hour independent "TV series" shot on video with a minimal budget and crew and improvised performances from six

significant experiment in improvised dialogue (DVD2 Item 8). Making use of the possibilities of shooting on videotape, *Stargazers* involved working with six actors I know (three professional and three amateur), allowing them to develop their own characters through a process of talking to me on camera, then improvising situations where the six characters interact.



The film was a deliberate attempt to challenge conventional notions of duration and pacing in fictional screen narratives, exploring the relationship between narrative and performance and referencing the work of French director Jacques Rivette<sup>15</sup>.

*Stargazers* included a scene involving a long conversation between two of the less experienced actors in the cast. The scene was set in a pub with the two actors sitting at a table and I rolled the camera for two hours without stopping. The conversation was fully improvised and became quite personal. It struck me in editing this scene later that I used virtually no material from the first hour of the recording. The second hour, by contrast, contained a large amount of fascinating material. There is no doubt that the experience of this scene inspired me to attempt something similar in *How To Change The World* with the pub customer scenes.

Eight conversations were recorded as part of the pub customer component of the film. While some interesting and worthwhile footage was captured, I was slightly disappointed in the overall qualities of the material available.



Pub customer sequences from *How To Change The World*

In evaluating the experience of producing this component of the film, based on the experiences of *Stargazers*, I think that shooting these scenes for longer may have produced better results. I was conscious of this issue at the time but felt that increasing these shoots from one hour to two would have added too much pressure to the schedule. As discussed

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wonderful actors. An inspired blend of Rivette-influenced modernism and dry, very Australian humour.

(<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/30/favourites3.html#wilson>)

<sup>15</sup> Particularly the films *Out One* (1971) and *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974)

in the previous chapter in relation to an 'economy of goodwill' on micro-budget shoots, based on feedback I got from various participants this would have been asking too much of most of the pub customer performers and the crew. Putting to one side the judgment of whether this component of the film met my initial expectations, the pub customer sequences did highlight several issues I am concerned with in this chapter. The sequences were a critical element in respect to some of the key creative objectives of the film: particularly telling a story with multiple voices, and mixing fiction and non-fiction in the one narrative. They were also a significant factor in allowing me to structure the improvised drama sequences into an overall narrative, given the otherwise awkward transitions between the various drama scenes.

The genesis of this aspect of the film lay in a previous work (*Stargazers*), which informed my approach to the shooting of these scenes. I was consciously trying to keep the amount of direction to a minimum, asking the participants to sit, drink and chat, about themselves or the world around them. However, when I realised the scenes were not producing the type of material I felt was needed, I made adjustments as the shoot proceeded. My research diary of 25 October 2006 records discussing the problem with my two co-producers (Julia Morris and Linda Wall). Through the selection of participants, I was hoping some of the discussion would provide an interesting counterpoint to the drama scenes in its engagement with the issue of 'how to change the world'. However, the first few groups we filmed did not touch on this topic in any meaningful way. While maintaining a low level of direction towards the participants, as the shooting progressed I was more explicit about the areas I would like them to discuss in the preparatory conversations I had with them.

Through this process, I was very conscious of the extent to which I should or could control the situation. It was an environment where I felt it would be counterproductive to direct the participants too closely, as well as being inconsistent with the overall creative philosophy of the production, which was to encourage the on-screen participants to contribute significantly to the content of the story. As in many other areas, I had to weigh up whether I should intervene to improve the situation or respect the overall creative and philosophical premises of the production, accepting that what was occurring was the best that could be produced in the circumstances. I found there was no clear answer as to how to make this judgment. However, the issue clearly resonated with the writing of both Bourdieu and Schön. Getting the most out of this component of the film required a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 62-3; 1998, pp. 79-81), based on my feelings for what would be required for the production to succeed in professional and academic contexts (position-takings), as well as my desire to not over-control the performances while getting what I felt was suitable content (dispositions). Even more clearly, it was possible for me to frame this judgment as a 'conversation with the situation' (Schön 1983, pp. 163-166). I had to respond in the moment to what was occurring, drawing on a repertoire of experiences and strategies to get the most satisfactory result. I had been framing my approach to these sequences within the context of what occurred on *Stargazers*, then had to adjust this frame when this was not producing the results I wanted.

### **Example 3: Uses of technology**

The role of technology is an important factor in seeking an understanding of the habitus of screen production, the history of my positions within the field of screen production and my dispositions as a creative practitioner. It is also a key element in the material circumstances of production that distinguishes the micro-budget sector from the mainstream professional one.



Even on a small production, the creative process of filmmaking is so mediated by the technology used that the choices you make in this area have a profound effect on the quality of your work, as well as the dynamics and culture of the production process. Putting too much or too little emphasis on the production technology can both have serious negative consequences for the creative objectives of the film. As a screen production educator, I have seen countless times how great creative ideas and production effort have foundered through a lack of knowledge of or attention to technical detail. In the micro-budget field, this is an especially fraught area, as you are often working with inexperienced crew under the pressure of time. In the professional sphere, I have also witnessed many productions where the process has become dysfunctional due to an overemphasis on aspects of the technology, whether that be in the areas of camera, sound or lighting.

As a filmmaker, I have been interested in all aspects of the production process - creative, organisational and technical. Over the course of my career, I have worked professionally as a camera operator, sound recordist and editor, so I think it would be accurate to say I have a disposition towards an informed engagement with the technology being used on my productions. In my experience, there is something like a fetishising of new technology within the habitus of screen production. It is common for quality to be equated with the use of the latest production equipment. On *How To Change The World*, my objective was to choose technology that supported the creative objectives of the shoot. Using improvisation with the actors, using a lot of non-actors in the pub customer scenes and working with a small crew on a relatively tight schedule are all factors that suggest a small, lightweight camera would be the best option.

I consulted my production crew and other technical experts about the most appropriate equipment to use within the limited range of options available to me. At the time, HD technology had considerable prestige as a production technology, offering much higher picture resolution than older SD cameras. HDV cameras were a possibility for me to use, which are a low-end version of HD technology, aimed at what could be described as the prosumer market. My research suggested mixed reports about HDV, which has a lot of compression applied to it to enable the increased resolution at a much lower cost than true HD. Advice I got from a director of photography whose judgment I respect suggested that the level of compression applied commonly produced artefacts in the image that were undesirable. My experience and research also suggested that there is an over-emphasis on the tape format in considerations of picture quality and that the quality of the lens on the camera also has a significant effect on this issue. One area I was particularly interested in exploring was the use of telephoto lenses in capturing improvised performances, so in this respect the lens being used also needed to be considered.

The decision about which camera to use was not an easy or clear-cut one. In the end I decided to go with a large DVCam production camera, the Sony DSR450. This camera was not able to record in HD or HDV but it had a very high quality lens and the large DVCam tape format has proven to be robust and reliable. The main Director of Photography on the shoot, Ashley Koek, was quite happy to work with this camera and it did support using focus pulls and telephoto lenses for creative purposes. For a camera operator with any experience, a large camera is not an impediment to effective hand-held camerawork. Some prefer the extra weight because it provides more stability. My main concern with this camera choice was in relation to the pub customer scenes, where I thought some of the non-actors speaking in these sequences would be inhibited with too much large technology surrounding them. Based on the evidence of the shoot, it is hard to evaluate whether my disappointment with the material produced in these sequences could be put down to this factor. On the shoot, I was at pains to ensure that the process of shooting the pub customer conversations was as straightforward for the participants as possible. I insisted on a static camera and simple, unobtrusive microphone placement. Taking everything into account, my evaluation of this decision is that it was the correct one.



The camera used in *How To Change The World* (a Sony DSR450)

In some respects, deciding to use a large production camera on a low budget project with a focus on improvisation seems contradictory. This issue is another example of the complex competing tensions involved in some aspects of the production, and the need to look beyond the sometimes seductive rhetoric surrounding new technology. Choices of technology on a production like *How To Change The World* have impacts that go well beyond issues of technical quality and are entwined with the social and creative dimensions of the production process. To the extent that I was comfortable making a choice that was not predictable based on my experience in the area, I also feel this example illustrates a degree of agency along the lines that have been discussed in this chapter.

#### **Example 4 – Creative risk-taking: the *Ghost News***

At this stage of my career as a filmmaker, I believe I have a disposition to take considered creative risks in relation to my practice. However, the positions within the field of screen production where this is possible are limited. I viewed the research and micro-budget context of *How To Change The World* as offering a space where it was possible to test propositions in relation to my practice. The *Ghost News* sequence (00:13:56) in *How To Change The World* is an example of this, where I took a risk with an element of the production that I do not believe I would have done if the priority for the overall project was to reach a broad audience.





The *Ghost News* sequence from *How To Change The World*

My concept for the sequence was to combine my knowledge of commercial television news with a dramatic sensibility found in the work of Brecht and Kluge, to tell a story of political agency in the contemporary world. The absurdist quality of the concept, combined with the low-tech roughness of the visual effects, also reflect my interest in the schlock 'Z movie' aesthetics of exploitation filmmakers like Roger Corman, himself an exemplary model from an earlier era of micro-budget film production practice.

Image removed for  
copyright reasons.

*Creature From The Haunted Sea* (Roger Corman, 1961)

I deliberately wanted to throw together ostensibly incompatible modes of screen-based storytelling to see what was produced. This is a common creative strategy (Hallam & Ingold 2007, p. 46) and was consistent with the overall creative strategy of the film, to convey multiple and competing voices in expressing the social world of the narrative. In many ways I was drawing on both dispositions and experience from previous positions in my creative practice in what I felt was a risky hybrid experiment in form. It was, in part, a desire to attempt new ways of telling stories on screen, in relation to my own practice if not more broadly. In this context, I was reasonably happy with the outcome but I think the sequence has a number of shortcomings, on its own terms and in relation to how it integrates with the overall film.

Probably more than in any other part of the film, in this sequence I wrestled with the unwieldiness that is a feature of working with improvised material. The circumstances surrounding the shooting of this sequence also contributed to the problems. The shooting of the sequence was not commenced until the rest of the shoot was completed. With a couple of exceptions, the crew who worked on the initial (long) shoot were exhausted and had moved on. The subject matter for the sequence (focused on a meeting of the G20 group of nations in Melbourne) was not settled on until after the rest of the shoot and was improvised over the several days the sequence was shot. One of the two *Ghost News* readers dropped out the day before the studio shoot and I had to, very reluctantly, take over the role. All these factors are characteristic of the scrambling nature of micro-budget filmmaking but, in my view, contributed to a situation where the way the sequence was produced and how it integrated with the rest of the film became too uncontrolled. By the

time I got to editing the *Ghost News* sequence, the possibilities for making any changes were negligible. Much of the difficulty I encountered was that I did not feel I could effectively cut up this material and split it into smaller sections, a strategy I had used with most of the other improvised material. The design of the overall film required the *Ghost News* to be in one segment at that part of the narrative and the material was not available to effectively break it into smaller segments and integrate it into the rest of the story. Where I had designed the other elements of the film to be as flexible as possible in how they worked, in this case the concept was too rigid.

I worked a lot on shaping the *Ghost News* in different ways and attempting to shorten it. I gave serious thought to cutting it out of the film entirely. However, in the context of the film being a research project, I finally decided to leave it in its current form, despite the fact that I feel it is too long and disrupts the unfolding of the other narrative elements in the film too severely. I view it as an experiment that only partially worked. However, I believe it is worthwhile in the context of my research to be able to screen the film with this sequence as part of it, so that I can evaluate how people react. It certainly seems to be the element of the film that leaves some people nonplussed. A reasonable proportion do not express any concerns with the sequence but there is an overall consensus that it is too long.

In the feedback sessions I undertook after the initial screening of the film to cast, crew and invited guests, one of the most useful responses was from a film scholar who said that the difficulty a general audience might have with this scene, this film (and in fact all my films) is its surface 'daggy' that is combined with and in some ways masks the intellectual and cinematically literate dimensions of the work. I immediately thought this comment highlighted tensions in my work I have been aware of but I felt were particularly well articulated on this occasion.

In the context of the current discussion, I feel the *Ghost News* was arguably the most overtly exploratory component of the film. It combined carefully (but quickly) written elements such as the news story script with elements that were made up as we went along. It also integrated fiction and non-fiction elements in different ways than were done in the rest of the film. It was a production process that was improvised to the extent that things were shot and then subsequent shoots were created or changed based on what had occurred. Like much improvisation, it had as a basic structure a widely accepted format (television news), which was a launching pad for a degree of formal experimentation and playful inventiveness.

## **Agency revisited**

The evolution of my practice has seen a move towards a more exploratory approach to the process of screen drama production, shifting the focus away from controlling every stage of the process. But how, in the moment of screen production practice, can you act with agency, with an ability to make choices that reflect your own identity as a creative practitioner, and with an informed independence from the dominant conventions of the field?

In their work on the development of identity and agency in cultural worlds, Holland et. al. discuss the development of mastery in practice through a number of stages from 'novice' to 'proficient' to 'expert' (1998 p. 117). They highlight how various studies have shown that novices are more dependent on rules and maxims, usually learnt from others. As competency increases, 'the various elements of the situation become organised into a gestalt. The individual learns to think in terms of broader components of the overall situation' (ibid., p. 117). The authors then describe how, with greater experience, the process is internalised and no longer needs to be guided by external forms. The final stage

in the movement to expertise is what Vygotsky described as 'fossilization' but is also related to Bourdieu's concept of the habitus. 'We simply do something, no longer thinking how we do it' (ibid., p. 117). The critical aspect of this issue for Holland et. al. is how this movement towards expertise leads to agency in whatever cultural world the person is operating in.

The individual comes to experience herself not as following rules or maxims taught by others but as devising her own moves (ibid., p. 118).

I believe my analysis of my own development as a screen practitioner is consistent with this view. I have argued that my influences can be seen to operate on a number of levels, some more conscious than others. However, over time, my influences and experiences have created, on an individual level, a socially and culturally constructed disposition to do things in practice in a certain way, which has also reflected the various positions in the field in which I have been operating. Through applying my cinematic and screen production influences in practice, interacting with ideas from my own personal experience, over time I have developed an identity as a filmmaker. Holland et. al. argue that developing an identity within a cultural world is a necessary first step to developing the ability to imagine things differently and to act differently. In this exegesis, I have been exploring whether the research I have been undertaking and the greater knowledge I have developed about my practice can contribute to this process.

An issue my research highlighted was that my practice in the process of screen production, while partly internalised and intuitive, also involves a complex interaction with conscious reflection. In this sense, Schön's concept of reflection-in-action seems particularly appropriate. It is not the case that, in the moment of practice, I was acting without thought. It is more that the situation has an immediacy that precludes calm or extended reflection. In this situation, reflection has an urgency that, in my view, may be greatly improved through the more detailed understanding of practice that research of the sort I have been undertaking enables. I would argue that a thorough understanding of my past practices and the influences on my work should contribute to a more effective approach to confronting situations of uncertainty in future practice.

My experience in the production of *How To Change The World* also suggests it is important to not make assumptions that the filmmaker is acting in isolation as an individual, and that their history and dispositions are the only factors at work in the situation. The filmmaker is acting in a complex set of social and material relations that include the actions of many other people. Holland et. al. (1998), in particular, stress the social conflict that occurs in cultural worlds and the need to be attentive to 'the social distribution of cultural knowledge and its role in power relations' (p. 122), with all its interacting individual desires and resistances.

It was clear in my experience making *How To Change The World*, whether that involved the implementation of visual strategies I had developed, the use of improvised dialogue in every scene or the work with non-actors in the 'pub customer' sequences, that my struggle to get the best outcome for the film involved negotiations with the needs of others on many levels. On some occasions I asserted my position as the director (and also in some cases as an older and more experienced 'authority figure'). On others, I compromised in the interests of keeping people feeling happy and involved, which on a micro-budget production can be seen as a form of social capital that is vitally important.

## Conclusion

At the start of Chapter 3, I drew attention to my interest in the question of agency in relation to the characters in *How To Change The World*, and how it was paralleled in relation to my own practice as a filmmaker. A similar parallel could also be said to apply to the issue

of improvisation, which seemed to be a concept that pervaded most aspects of the process, well beyond its role in the actors' performances. In this chapter, I have identified 'scrambling' as a term I used in my reflective writing to describe the experience of making the film *How To Change The World*. Prior to investigating the theoretical context of the production in depth, it was a term I chose to capture what I would now describe as an improvisational process, where the complexities and pressures of implementing a creative plan required effective responses to a rapidly evolving practical environment. The role of improvisation on the production and its significance for understanding my practice will be considered in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 6: IMPROVISATION

## Introduction

When filmmakers measure their films against their experience of the world they often find them lacking. What has been referred to as a crisis of representation in a broad spectrum of human studies has resulted from just such a sense of discrepancy between experience and the existing paradigms for representing it (MacDougall 1998, p. 214).

The trajectory of my career as a filmmaker has been towards an increasing use of improvisation. As expressed by MacDougall (1998) in the quotation above, I believe one of the main reasons for this is my realisation that the scripted and controlled screen drama I have produced in the past has felt inadequate in capturing human behaviour in aspects that are important to me. I have considered my interest in improvisation in relation to my background as both a film viewer and filmmaker. Early significant influences on my developing ideas as a filmmaker, such as Robert Altman and Jacques Rivette, used improvised performances as a central element in their directorial styles (Wexman 1980). As a film viewer, there were qualities in these performances that seemed distinct from those that were determined by a more structured and composed script. However, I was never able to clearly articulate to myself or others what these qualities were. At an intuitive level, I was drawn to the sense of uncertainty and unpredictability captured in these films, where moments of performance were intensely 'watchable' in ways that seemed independent of the needs of the plot. The presence of the actor seemed different in these moments, there were digressive links to other and contradictory experiences that appealed to me but also quite intangible qualities that I could not articulate.

The interaction between two people when they relate contains uncertainties, miscommunications, hesitations, contradictions and confusions that can be apparent on many levels, in what is spoken and what is unspoken. To me, capturing these dimensions of human interaction is amongst the most important objectives I have as a fiction filmmaker. Without them, dramatic scenes strike me as sterile and false. I have found through past films I have made that using a greater degree of improvisation has allowed me to achieve results I am happier with in this regard. As a creative practice research project, *How To Change The World* was at least partially designed to explore this issue.

Drawing on the outcomes of this research, in this chapter I will discuss the possibilities and dangers of using improvised performances in screen production. This exploration will involve a discussion of the relationship between performances and the narrative structures in which they occur, as well as the mode of production best suited to supporting this style of performance. It will also argue that theoretical perspectives from writers such as Bakhtin (1981; 1986), Fischlin & Heble (2004) and Smith & Dean (1997) can inform the practice and support more meaningful decisions around the use of improvisation in screen production.

## What is improvisation and what is its appeal?

I reject the word 'script' entirely — at any rate in the usual sense. I prefer the old usage — usually scenario — which it had in the Commedia dell'Arte, meaning an outline or scheme: it implies a dynamism, a number of ideas and principles from which one can set out to find the best possible approach to filming (Jacques Rivette quoted in Monaco 1976, p. 324).

*How To Change The World* was made without a script. However, there were two separate two-page outlines written, which provided a framework for the characters and plot, although neither described an ending. Through the audition and rehearsal process, actors were able to develop their roles so that they felt more comfortable about responding in character while being filmed. During the filming, there was a range of strategies used to generate the dialogue for the scenes. The majority of the dialogue scenes were based on whatever the actors came up with in the first take, without prior rehearsal, then that first take being used as the basis for some additional coverage of the scene.

This raises the question of the extent to which it is valid to describe the approach taken as improvisation? The absence of a script suggests a degree of spontaneity but there was substantial preparation and premeditation as well. At the beginning of a detailed examination of improvisational practices in a range of artistic fields since the mid-twentieth century, Smith & Dean offer a simple definition of artistic improvising as 'the simultaneous conception and performance of a work' (1997, p. 3). They contrast improvisational with compositional work, defining 'composition' as 'a means of creating art works as fully as possible prior to their exposure to their audience' (ibid., p. 4). These terms, they argue, should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, so one way of looking at the performances in a screen production such as *How To Change The World* could be to describe them as improvisation within a compositional work. In screen production, for example, the editing stage allows a careful selection and structuring of any unscripted material. In some respects this is an important point that distinguishes improvisation in screen production practice from more purely performative forms of improvisation, which are entirely transient and unrepeatable.

### **Improvisation in filmmaking and the arts**

Considering screen production as a balance between improvisational and compositional practices offers a means for more precisely describing a range of approaches associated with directors known for their use of improvisation. On closer examination, filmmakers popularly associated with improvisation such as Mike Leigh, John Cassavetes and Larry David (in the television series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, 2000-11) are all using the concept in different ways and at different times. These different approaches reflect the tensions in much screen drama between encouraging a documentary-like verisimilitude while maintaining control over a complex technological and logistical creative process.

Leigh, for instance, works without a script and creates his films through an extended and heavily improvised process of character development with his chosen actors. However, when it comes to the demands of the filming stage, everything is decided and controlled (although not written down). According to Leigh, it is a process of 'rehearsing it all very thoroughly so that the only things that can go wrong are those things you can't control' (Movshovitz 2000, p.112). Cassavetes also heavily qualifies his use of improvisation, claiming that there was virtually no 'verbal improvisation' in his films and confining his use of the term to the emotions conveyed by his characters.

After *Shadows* (1959) I realized that things work better when they're written down beforehand. There are fewer problems. Once the script is written, people can act more freely. Otherwise there's too much tension. It's too hard to deal with. What happens is that the audience gets the impression of improvisation because the actors interpret their roles themselves (Cassavetes & Carney (ed.) 2001, p. 161).

David uses an approach on *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-11) known as 'retroscripting', where the production team works from an outline but the dialogue is improvised at the point of



filming<sup>16</sup>. This is closer to the approach employed on *How To Change The World*. In contrast to the methods of Leigh and Cassavetes, David's approach does not seek as much control at the time the drama is actually recorded, instead actively attempting to capture unexpected material at that stage of the process. According to Smith & Dean, this is consistent with broader understandings of improvisation in the arts. While critiquing the 'naïve romantic notions of spontaneity, simplicity and lack of expertise' (1997, p. 25) that have grown around improvisation, Smith & Dean also highlight how

most statements about improvisation stress its exploitation of the present moment and the concomitant excitement and fluidity this generates. Improvisers rarely commence with a detailed awareness of what will happen; and in many cases they are actively striving for the event to be novel (ibid., p. 25).

Fischlin & Heble are also critical of some of the myths they argue are associated with improvisation, such as the position that sees it as a process of 'unblocking the obstacles that impede access to forms of individual self-expression' (2004, p. 23). While improvisation is clearly focused on responding to the unpredictability of the moment, these writers and others, such as Soules (2004), stress how improvisation often operates within formal structures or constraints that connect the practice to collaborators and broader creative, social and cultural contexts.

My own experience with improvisation suggests that a term like 'spontaneity' is not adequate in capturing the full complexity of what is occurring in an improvised performance. Improvised approaches also seem to challenge significant principles of screen production that are widely accepted – including concepts of duration, structure and the relationship between performance and narrative – as well as many methods that have been developed to support a more planned and controlled approach to the production process. It is these issues that my research through the production of *How To Change The World* was designed to investigate.

The role of the script in drama and in screen drama is widely accepted. However, there is a range of writers who question its central role in the process. The tension between a more controlled approach to the production process, expressed through the use of a script on the one hand and a more exploratory, uncontrolled approach that emphasises the 'doing' of the performance on the other, has been highlighted by Schechner (1988) as a feature of theatre across cultures and through history. Since the Renaissance in Western civilization, Schechner describes how the earlier relationship between script and performance has been inverted and the focus shifted towards the 'words-of-the-drama' at the expense of the 'doing of the performance'. Schechner suggests this transformation is related to a rise in literacy.

Maintaining the words intact grew in importance; how they were said, and what gestures accompanied them, was a matter of individual choice, and of lesser importance (ibid., p. 69).

The twentieth century saw the cinema develop as a major form of mass media entertainment, and from early in this period most films were produced in an industrial

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<sup>16</sup> Retroscribing appears to first emerge as a term in relation to the animated television series *Dr Katz, Professional Therapist* (1995-2002), but is now used more broadly in drama, comedy and mockumentary-style live-action production, where the dialogue is improvised from scene outlines. A recent Australian example of this approach is the short television series *Summer Heights High* (2007).

context. Describing the understanding of the emerging classical Hollywood production system as it developed around 1910, Bordwell, Thompson & Staiger write:

The basic principles of Hollywood film practice are here already: the story as the basis of the film, the technique as an 'indiscernible thread', the audience as controlled and comprehending, and complete closure as the end of all. Moreover, these ideas soon came to be accepted as a set of truisms (1985, p. 195).

Within a production system that Bordwell et. al. (1985) argue developed into a globally dominant mode of production, the script plays a central role in the control of the filmmaking process. Thompson argues that little has changed in contemporary cinema (1999, p. 346). Within an industrial mode of production, the screenplay document is a key element by which a film concept moves (or perhaps more commonly does not move) from being a creative idea held by one or two people to being a multi-million dollar business enterprise. There are, of course, many advantages to using a script beyond controlling the logistics of the filmmaking process. Scripting is usually needed when the focus is on complex plots, layered subtexts, elaborate visual effects or witty dialogue. Furthermore, the existence of a script does not, on its own, require the resulting film to be shot in a rigid, literal or prescriptive way. However, my own experience, on a film such as *Holidays On The River Yarra* (1991), suggests that the classic Hollywood mode of production in which most films are produced too easily leads to the script over-determining the screen production process, resulting in what Geuens (2000) has described as 'film as a mere illustration of a pre-existing story' (p. 95).

Millard (2006) provides a detailed critique of the role of script gurus within the contemporary film industry and the consequences of this for practitioners interested in a more visual and improvisational approach to storytelling. She takes issue with both the focus on conflict and the universalising tendency of writers like McKee (1999), positioning their advocacy for 'the gospel of story' and the appeal of their approach within the traditions of the American self-help movement. She draws on evidence from filmmakers such as Raul Ruiz, Wim Wenders, Atom Egoyan, Gus Van Sant and Wong Kar Wai in arguing for an approach to screen production that is more diverse, creative and cinematic.

Sainsbury sees the dominant role of the script within the production process as having a risk minimisation function within the financial context in which mainstream commercial films get produced, viewing it as a way in which investors (commonly film distributors) attempt to control the product they are funding, in order to protect their investment.

When getting a movie financed is always a matter of cracking the market before the film is made, and never the other way around, the script becomes by far the most important consideration in the risk business and its value is increasingly measured by quasi-objective criteria. As such, it has to promise a degree of safety. It has to look and feel familiar. It has to cover all the bases in telling a conventionally intelligible story. It has to comply with certain given rules of the writer's craft. And above all, it has to entirely determine the film that is made from it (2003b, p. 15).

Sainsbury highlights the different functions of the script on a commercial dramatic film. A script is commonly regarded as a creative document, although its functions in the financing, planning and project management of the film are also significant. Notwithstanding this, a number of writers and filmmakers, including Geuens (1999) and Astruc (1968), have highlighted the incongruity in how the creative planning for a film occurs through words on a page, rather than images and sounds on a screen.

Having made the commitment to working without a script, I have spent considerable time reflecting on why this is important to me, both at the time of filming and subsequent to the

shoot. Working without a script shifts the focus in the process to the performative but what are the qualities in an unscripted performance that sets it apart?



I would like to discuss this with reference to the scene pictured above, which is between Jazz, the Indian international student working at the pub to help pay her fees, and Sarah, a more experienced barmaid she befriends (00:36:22; DVD2 Item 3). Jazz has a date with a regular customer at the pub (Pete) and is asking Sarah for advice. Both actors had preparation for their roles prior to the shooting stage commencing, involving discussions about their characters and rehearsals where they were able to improvise situations similar to the scenes they would appear in. Before the actual filming of this scene, there was only a general discussion of its content. Significant issues that arose in the dialogue were not discussed beforehand, like Pete's character, clothing, even the fact that it was Jazz's 'first date'. The scene was shot in two takes – one as a wider two shot and a second as a tighter framing with pans between the two characters. It was a scene where I was particularly impressed with the dialogue the actors came up with and how they were able to capture the social and emotional dynamic between the characters.

## Spontaneity

Prior to *How To Change The World*, I would have used a term like 'spontaneity' to describe the appeal of improvised performances. I now feel it is a component of the issue but insufficient on its own to describe what is going on. Nonetheless, the sense of what Smith and Dean describe as 'the present moment' in a scene like the one above is a key feature of its appeal. The improvised approach lends a quality to the unfolding interaction between the characters that is hard (although perhaps not impossible) to replicate when the dialogue is determined in advance. I believe this quality has something to do with the unpredictability that operates within an improvised scene around each character working at communicating meaning and making sense of the other character's meaning. To me, this unpredictability adds interest to the broader sense-making process of the audience responding to the narrative and, I would argue, enhances the drama.

Conceiving of meaning in a speech act as a two way process involving both a speaker and listener is what Mikhail Bakhtin addressed in his theory of the dialogic. Although he wrote almost exclusively on the novel, Bakhtin is widely seen as a philosopher of language more than a literary critic (1986, pp. xiv-xv). For Bakhtin, the meaning of an utterance cannot be determined by considering it in isolation. He viewed the process of human communication in all its forms as 'dialogic'. I have found Bakhtin's ideas useful in conceiving of an approach to screen narrative that better reflects my understanding of the nature of human experience in society, and addresses some of the reservations I have with mainstream forms of screen-based storytelling. I believe the looser, hybrid and poly-vocal approach to screen narrative

that I was experimenting with in *How To Change The World*, with its emphasis on improvisation in dialogue and narrative structure, can be seen to have parallels with Bakhtin's views on language.

The basic unit of analysis in Bakhtin's theories is the utterance. This focus on the speech act as distinct from the written word highlights the centrality of practice to Bakhtin. In his consideration of language, Bakhtin also emphasises the complex and heavily contextualised interaction between speaker and responder in determining the meaning of an utterance.

In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement. To some extent, primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the grounds for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response (Bakhtin 1981, p. 282).

In the scene between Jazz and Sarah above, the sense in which the two characters have independent subjectivities that are sometimes connecting and sometimes not, the quite visible tension at play between the spoken and the unspoken, and the emotional nuances and complexities in the relationship are, to me, portrayed quite effortlessly by the two actors in a way that has a richness I am convinced I would be unable to script. Jazz wants advice about 'having fun', what to wear and how she should look. She is hesitant and nervous about an unfamiliar social situation but also excited by the possibilities. Sarah is trying to warn about concerns she has with Pete's motives and potential dangers she senses. When Jazz does not respond to her tentative expression of concern, she changes direction in a desire not to spoil Jazz's fun. None of these issues were discussed in advance between the actors and me. What makes the performances different from scripted ones for me is the texture, detail and fluidity of the interaction, the clear sense that there are multiple thoughts going on, sometimes half thought and abandoned, different and contradictory emotions rising and falling, with all the complex use of gestures and expressions that accompany this interchange.

My experience with a scene such as this supports the view expressed by Fischlin & Heble (2004, p. 23) that, contrary to the myth that improvisation is primarily concerned with unrestrained self-expression, it is more often intensely social, dealing with performers listening as much as speaking, negotiating meaning in the moment, foregrounding the process of communication and the failures of communication.

## **Multiple viewpoints**

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (Barthes 1977, p. 146).

A feeling that has always drawn me to improvisation is the conviction that I could not write the type of dialogue that is produced using this approach. To me, one of the strongest motivations for moving towards an increasingly improvised approach was the dissatisfaction in my practice with the limits of my own creative perspective. I realised as I moved away from a reliance on a written script that it shifted the focus from the author/director being the sole source of creative authority on the shoot (or the script as the creative bible for the production) towards a more varied and diverse approach. The film was not limited by my imagination, it did not just reflect my way of doing things and saying things. There is of

course a risk of going too far in this direction and lapsing into multi-perspectival incoherence but exploring the nature of this balance was a major focus of this research.

The following clip struck me as a successful synthesis within *How To Change The World* of multiple creative voices, where the actors made distinctive individual contributions that were both independent of the needs of the plot but also integrated into it. In this case, I felt I was also able to shoot the scene in a simple and dramatically effective way that supported the improvised performances but also visually expressed key elements of the unfolding narrative drama, through decisions about angles, lenses and staging.



In this scene, Jazz is chatting to her 'uni buddy' Nick when she realises she may be being watched by Pete, who has not taken well to them breaking up (01:00:53, DVD2 Item 5). In one long take broken by two cutaways of the parked car Jazz is referring to (which were used to cover cuts in the master shot), the dialogue moves from an anecdote Nick tells about a local event, 'Bollywood at the Bowl', to a slightly humorous exchange when Jazz refers to the car she has spotted, then shifts gear into a more serious tone with Jazz telling Nick about Pete (which has unstated implications about how Nick feels about Jazz) and expressing serious fears about her safety.

As well as seeing communication as an active and dialogic process, Bakhtin also saw it as intensely contextual, with the meaning of any utterance being influenced by myriad social, historical, cultural and personal forces. He used the term 'heteroglossia' to describe this aspect of language:

there are no 'neutral' words and forms – words and forms that belong to 'no one'; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word (Bakhtin 1981, p. 293).

As for Bakhtin in relation to the novel, I feel the potential richness of an improvised approach to screen drama is in its ability to capture this contextual complexity in language and society, mixing diverse voices with their individual perspectives, and the 'extreme heterogeneity of speech genres' (Bakhtin 1986, p. 61), from brief everyday exchanges to sophisticated literary, philosophical or scientific reflections.

Nick's anecdote about going to Bollywood in the Bowl is just one example of many in the film where the social and cultural richness of the everyday world is incorporated into the narrative. Although it reflects a blurring of the distinction between actor and character (a blurring which the many pub customers do in reverse), I had a conscious desire to bring everyday life into the film, with the objective of locating the drama within a specific historical time, place and culture. One of the features of the social and cultural environment I wanted to portray was its heterogeneity, and capturing that in greater than usual complexity was one of the distinct goals I had for the production. Through the range of actors and pub customers (who were non-actors) I was trying to achieve a drama of 'multiple voices' that captured the diversity of a community. As Bakhtin describes, I wanted to portray how 'life enters language through concrete utterances' (ibid., p. 63).

## **Protocols of improvisation**

Of course, everyone 'improvises.' Conversation is the most common form (Snow 2004, p. 49).

The use of non-actors as pub customers who would be filmed discussing a wide range of issues was a key feature of the concept for *How To Change The World*. It was always the intention for this element to make up about half the content of the film and the objective was to show a range of perspectives, from actual regulars at the pub to academics, knitters, young adults as well as very old ones. Most of the conversations were recorded without a cut and with the technology being as unobtrusive as possible – so the lighting was minimal, the camera never moved and the microphone was a plate that just sat on the table.

I hoped this approach would produce conversations that captured the contextual richness of everyday language, Bakhtin's heteroglossia, with its diverse perspectives, languages and tones. The intention was for these improvised conversations to function as a portrayal of a community, as well as a commentary on and counterpoint to the themes of the fictional drama. While not all the conversations were as successful in meeting these objectives as I had hoped, I did feel the diversity of voices was effectively achieved.

The process with the pub customers highlighted the structure and skill involved in successful improvisation. Even with a very unobtrusive approach, I felt many of the non-actors were more inhibited by the presence of the camera than I anticipated, giving 'performances' that were awkward and self-conscious. The mixed success I had with improvisational qualities using non-actors made me reflect on the two myths about improvisation that Fischlin & Heble (2004) highlight: that it is about freedom from constraint and individual creativity. Far from being an activity that works best in a free, unstructured environment, my experience with improvisation is that it is most successful with skilled practitioners in a structured creative environment. Soules uses the concept of 'protocols' to describe the social and cultural codes that structure improvisation. Writing about improvisation in both music and theatre, he argues that 'both are often marked by a spirit of subversion to conventions of orderliness and control, whether of the score/script or director/conductor' (2004, p. 269). However, the protocols of improvisation are a 'framework of productive constraints' (ibid., p. 269), strategies that 'glue events together' (ibid., p. 270), that often involve the individual's role within an ensemble and draw on the social and cultural traditions of the field.

The most successful scenes in *How To Change The World* to capture the improvisational qualities I was seeking seemed to work because I was able to provide the right number and type of what I would describe as signposts. This was often surprisingly little information, usually about the objectives of the characters in the scene, as well as the overall objective of the scene and where it fitted into the film. I found that too much and too little detail in these discussions both seemed to be inhibiting. Too much detail and the actors reverted to

playing the scene as though it were scripted. Too little detail and the resulting material lacked the focus to be very usable. These signposts could be seen to parallel Soules' protocols. When the balance was right they seemed to give the performers enough content and structure with which to effectively play the scene.

An analysis of the footage suggests that most of the actors when improvising were drawing on their own acting and personal experiences, their preparation in relation to the character they were portraying through the rehearsal and filming process and their understanding of the objectives of the film, gleaned from a range of sources but principally from discussions with me. In the improvised scenes I most valued, the actors were able to be quick thinking in drawing social and personal material into the scene, often in a surprisingly lateral way that required good judgment about relevance, with reference to their character, the story, the themes of the film and the feeling of the moment. More than anything, they demonstrated the ability to be responsive in the moment to the other people in the scene.

## **Improvisation and community**

Jazz improvisation and creative improvised music have always...been about community building (rather than individual self-expression), about fostering new ways of thinking about, and participating in, human relationships (Fischlin & Heble 2004, p. 23).

In terms of understanding the nature of the improvisational quality that can be achieved in unscripted performances and that I was seeking to incorporate as much as possible into *How To Change The World*, the final aspect I would like to discuss is the greater sense of community this approach conveys. As Fischlin & Heble suggest, and as my reading of Bakhtin reinforces, the improvisational approach taken towards the performances in *How To Change The World* shifted the focus during the filming of a shot from the individual actor towards the relationships between the actors. Improvisation, as in the actual interaction between people in society, requires each actor to listen to and respond to what the other actors in the scene offer. In my experience, the sense of the scene and its effectiveness as drama require the actors to collaborate to a much greater extent than in scripted productions. There is an element of unpredictability to the approach that gives it its distinctive dynamism but I would argue it also highlights the role of the individual in the ensemble by, as Fischlin & Heble suggest, 'intensifying acts of communication, by demanding that the choices that go into building communities be confronted' (2004, p. 23). They argue that 'jazz has always been about animating civic space with the spirit of dialogue and collaboration (ibid., p. 24) and I would agree that part of the politics of improvisation, even in a small way, is how it challenges myths of individual agency that are common in our society and are embedded in both the process and content of much screen production.

As I believe the two clips previously discussed demonstrate, the scenes are created through a process of dialogue, with the actors given considerable autonomy over the substance of their characters and how they relate to each other. More so than in traditional scripted approaches, in an improvised production, the actors become active.

## **Power, politics and improvisation**

To speak of dialogue without speaking of power, in a Bakhtinian perspective, is to speak meaninglessly, in a void. For Bakhtin, language is thus everywhere imbricated with asymmetries of power (Stam 1989, p. 8).

I believe what Bakhtin saw as the diversity and unruliness of speech links to my interest in improvisation. For Bakhtin, meaning in speech escapes control. Portraying a story that shifts the focus towards multiple improvised views rather than one controlled perspective is more consistent with my own experience as an individual in society. Robert Stam, whose book *Subversive Pleasures* (1989) is a detailed exploration of the relevance of Bakhtin's ideas to the cinema, draws attention to Bakhtin's focus on issues of power and struggle within the multiplicity of perspectives that he saw as being central to an understanding of language. Bakhtin elaborated on this struggle through the use of the concepts 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal', with centripetal forces pushing towards an official, sanctioned and 'proper' use of language, and centrifugal forces reflecting the diverse and multitudinous uses of speech in everyday practice. For Bakhtin, the centrifugal forces are both enriching and transgressive, as well as having a political dimension in challenging established power and dominant ideologies, through parody if nothing else.

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well, it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity (Bakhtin 1981, p. 272).

In this context, a possible way of conceiving of the use of improvised rather than scripted dialogue in a film is to see it as shifting the balance between centrifugal and centripetal forces in screen narrative towards the centrifugal, where the unpredictable interactions between individual actors and the juxtaposition of diverse speech genres is privileged over the more unitary perspective of a writer's or director's approved script. Overall, I think it can be argued that *How To Change The World* is a screen narrative that foregrounds the active construction of meaning through dialogue, the struggle between diverse perspectives and the social, historical and political forces that shape individual action.

I think one way of looking at my development as a filmmaker is as a transition from seeing the production process as the execution of a pre-existing plan generated by one person (me as the writer/director) to a more collaborative process that gives greater emphasis to the contributions of others. However, the discussion in this chapter so far has focused on improvisation in relation to the actors in the film and their performances. The actors are only one group amongst the creative participants in the screen production process. One thing that the production of *How To Change The World* highlighted was the tensions that can exist by taking an improvised approach to the performances while taking a more traditionally controlled approach to the filming.

### **Improvised performances, shooting methods and the crew.**

Given the broader ethical, social and political issues I have raised in relation to improvisation, it would be hard to justify isolating my engagement with this approach to the actors. There is nothing new in suggesting that improvised performances are inconsistent with mainstream methods for filming screen drama. Those techniques for filming drama are premised on a narrative concept that privileges spatial and temporal continuity. Angles, lighting, camera movement, sound and props are carefully designed to match from shot to shot, and multiple takes of a shot are often recorded to ensure the continuity is satisfactory. Technique needs to be an 'indiscernible thread' (Bordwell et. al. 1985, p. 195), so that it does not interfere with the audience perception of continuity. For the performers, considerable attention is paid across takes and across shots to ensure that this continuity is maintained. Lines need to be repeated accurately, the timing of gestures and other movements need to be synchronised with particular lines and eye-lines need to be accurately



matched between actors and in reference to the camera position. Actors are asked to be mindful of technical and logistical issues, and their performances are commonly recorded out of sequence in a piecemeal and repetitious way.

These requirements seem inconsistent with an improvised approach to performances. Given that the execution of key crew functions, such as camera operation, focus pulling and boom swinging, require a performance in the moment much like the work of the actors, a common response from the director/filmmaker in this situation is to apply accepted documentary production techniques, which have been developed to allow the filming of material and events that cannot be controlled. Hand-held camerawork can quickly respond to unpredictable action and a skilled camera operator can shoot cutaways and alternative angles during the one take to allow a rapidly unfolding event to be manipulated at the editing stage, to remove unwanted material and maintain visual interest. This approach is perfectly valid, although in my view also narrowly predictable. One of my research interests with *How To Change The World* was to explore alternatives to what I feel is an overly limited range of creative options in the use of camera and sound when filming improvisation.

In my experience, improvisation in drama works best if the actors are allowed to immerse themselves in the performance and the moment. As a consequence, filming improvisation seems to require the use of long takes. While in film there is a strong tradition of stylistically interesting long takes, these frequently involve elaborate execution, which again works contrary to the objectives of improvisation.<sup>17</sup> What seems to be required is a directorial approach that incorporates long takes that are simple to execute. However, when these conditions apply, how is it possible for the crew to have the same creative investment in the process as the actors? Within the shoot for *How To Change The World*, I tried out various responses to this problem, some more successful than others. However, the example that I felt best captured my response to the issue of supporting improvisation by the actors while meeting the creative needs of the crew was what I call the *bar scene* (00:45:57), where five actors were having a conversation. The narrative context of this scene involves Pete, a customer at the old pub where Jazz works, inviting her out to have a drink with some of his work colleagues at an up-market bar, where Jazz progressively gets drunker.



This scene was shot from one static angle over two takes, one of which ran for eight minutes and one for five, the two takes framed as occurring at different times of the evening (DVD2 Item 4). The actors were not given any instructions about the dialogue apart from a general discussion about their characters and the context of the scene within the overall

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<sup>17</sup> Examples include *Touch of Evil* (Welles 1958), *The Player* (Altman 1992) & *Russian Ark* (Sokurov 2002)

story. The sound was recorded using two microphones onto two separate tracks, so different conversations could run simultaneously yet remain isolated. The shot was recorded on a telephoto lens, so that all five characters could not all be held in focus at the one time. The camera assistant was directed to improvise which characters would be in focus at any one time by adjusting the lens as the conversation unfolded. The resulting footage had two main conversations occurring simultaneously. Both could be understood (with careful mixing). However, only one was in visual focus at any one time and this shifted in a fairly random way as the scene unfolded. To me, this created an important tension for the audience around identifying the centre of dramatic relevance in the narrative, with the framing and focus suggesting it may not at all times be with the 'main' characters<sup>18</sup>. This was a strategy that informed other decisions in the structuring of the narrative, such as the use of the dishwasher character Lynette as the narrator, rather than Max or Jazz. It was part of an attempt to locate characters within a complex social environment and challenge the sense that, as individual agents, they were wholly in charge of their story.

From my perspective, the results of the approach taken in the bar scene were successful. Both cast and crew had a high level of creative autonomy, which they seemed to enjoy, the drama was convincingly portrayed with the relationships between the characters, their social world and the emotions they are engaged with all being communicated using images and sound in an unusual but accessible way. In addition, the creative autonomy of the cast and crew complemented each other, rather than being in conflict.

Improvisation shifts the creative control within the production from the author/director to the other participants. The role of the director becomes less to 'direct' than to 'select'. While it is possible to view all film direction this way, in an improvised environment this aspect of the creative work is significantly foregrounded. In Bakhtin's view, a 'dialogic' approach to the novel (found in a writer such as Dostoevsky) allows the characters to have a voice independent of the author's:

a prose writer can distance himself from the language of his own work, while at the same time distancing himself, in varying degrees, from the different layers and aspects of the work (1981, p. 299).

In the *bar scene* described above, it was meaningless to do other takes from other angles, which would be normal production practice. This would require the actors to repeat what they had said, which in the circumstances (thirteen minutes of five-way unscripted conversation) would have been an absurd request. So all the director can do in this situation is say the raw material has been filmed and use the editing stage to select the fragments that will be used to construct the scene.

My experience during the making of *How To Change The World* was that, if there is a genuine commitment to creating a supportive environment for the actors during the shoot, it is challenging to find new visual approaches that do not involve simple staging in long takes. The tendency towards using long takes with few alternative angles also led me to draw the conclusion that an improvised approach to screen production encourages a fragmented approach to the narrative, through both the difficulty of manipulating, as well as the desire not to manipulate, the footage that has been recorded during the shooting stage of the process. This relationship between improvisation and narrative in the screen production process is the issue I would now like to turn to.

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<sup>18</sup> For me, this approach to the staging, recording and mixing of dialogue evokes the work of Robert Altman in film such as *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and *Nashville* (1975).

## Improvisation and narrative in *How To Change The World*

To direct is to inhale as well as to exhale  
(Geuens 2000, p. 112).

The improvised approaches used on the production of *How To Change The World* led to the actors (and to a lesser extent the crew) having a greater than usual control over the process. However, it became clear to me that this control was focused on the content and dynamics of individual scenes, rather than the way these scenes linked together to make a story. The focus of the cast and crew was on the moment and less so on the broader narrative significance of these moments within the whole. This resulted in a collection of scenes that were, to varying degrees, compelling to watch in isolation but prompted the question - how do you shape a narrative out of these moments and fragments?

As discussed earlier, I began with two two-page outlines of narratives that would form part of the film. By the end of the main shooting stage, I had a collection of scenes that reflected these outlines (broadly contained within the two separate narratives that nonetheless overlapped at times) and a range of pub customer conversations. Neither of the initial outlines had a settled resolution and the interrelation of the various segments was also quite undetermined. My original plan was to decide these things once I saw what I had, using a voice-over to connect elements where it seemed to be required.

### *The editing of the film*

The post-production process for *How To Change The World* began by carefully evaluating all the available material and narrowing down which video takes to use against a range of criteria. These criteria included the performative and improvisational qualities discussed earlier in this chapter (such as spontaneity and multiple viewpoints), the relevance of particular takes to the narrative outlines, as well as their stylistic and technical qualities. The various criteria were often in tension (an issue I have discussed earlier in relation to the *shot tower* scene in *How To Change The World*<sup>19</sup>), and judgments needed to be made about prioritising one over others. With the film being unscripted, part of the process was also about considering possibilities for structuring the entire work, as well as in the positioning of individual scenes and shots. For example, what intellectual and emotional resonances might be evoked by positioning scenes and shots in a certain order or combination? Various iterations of rough cuts were created and evaluated, before an optimum shape for the film emerged.

A significant strategy I employed in the post-production involved inter-cutting pub customer segments with scenes from the fictional stories. This was designed to both smooth shot-to-shot and narrative discontinuities that arose from the improvised drama and also allow the positioning of particular pub conversations around particular dramatic scenes. The intention in doing this was to create resonances through the connections established, with the pub conversations functioning as a kind of indirect commentary on the fictional stories. I did not wish these connections to be either too literal or too obscure and was constrained by the material available, so had mixed feelings about the success of this strategy. On a broader level, however, I felt that leaving these connections less pointed was consistent with the

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<sup>19</sup> See pages 45-49

overall dramatic strategy of the film, which was to portray a particular community with its diversity and contradictions.<sup>20</sup>

The voice-over was written half-way through the editing process, once an assembly of what I felt were the most effective scenes had been established. It was not until this point that a decision was made about the perspective of the voice-over. Up until then I had been focused on making a decision between a third-person narration or the main character, Max, delivering the voice-over. However, at that stage I did a degree of reflection and research regarding the issue of narration, taking into account the creative strategies and influences informing the production. Among these influences was a film by Alexander Kluge, *The Patriot* (1979), which is narrated by the knee of a soldier who died in the Battle of Stalingrad. This highly unusual narrative perspective motivated me to move beyond the obvious choices for narrator. As discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to the *bar scene* (pp. 73-74), the idea of shifting the dramatic focus from the central characters to the ones ostensibly in the background was consistent with the political and creative strategy of the film, so on this basis I decided to use the dishwasher Lynette as the narrator. I had always intended to use a Brechtian-style narration that was distanced from an emotional engagement with the main characters and encouraged a reflective perspective on the unfolding narrative. Influenced by another Kluge film, *Occasional Work of a Female Slave* (1973), the narration was quite consciously written to convey events and the connections between them in a dispassionate style. On this basis, the choice of Lynette as the narrator also seemed appropriate.

I had learnt from my experience in the making of the film that there was an important tension in improvisation between what I would describe as chaos and control. As I became more aware of this tension, understanding how to effectively resolve it was a major focus of the research. The need for signposts and protocols (Soules 2004) that allowed the performances to be structured in the achievement of effective results was part of this process. I was also aware that the screen production process was a hybrid form involving improvisational and compositional practices (Smith & Dean 1997). I had always conceived of the post-production as a compositional stage in the process but, within that framework, I was concerned to preserve the improvisational qualities I had worked with my collaborators to achieve. While acknowledging (as Bakhtin does in relation to the novel) that the screen production process needs to be orchestrated into a coherent work, I have considered whether there is an inconsistency in valuing improvisational qualities at the shooting stage of the process yet taking largely individual control over the editing. One way of conceptualising this process is to apply Bakhtin's ideas regarding the centripetal and centrifugal forces at play in speech acts to the creative process of screen production. I have argued that the improvisational approach taken to the production of *How To Change The World* privileged the centrifugal elements in screen performance, which are unruly and diverse but reflect the complexities of lived human experience in ways that are often neglected in mainstream filmmaking. The strategy was to capture these features of lived

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<sup>20</sup> Examples of this inter-cutting strategy include:

A pub customer scene where two young men talk about going home after a big night of drinking with a taxi driver who doesn't speak English, positioned after a scene of Jazz getting drunk on her first night out with Pete and having an ambiguous 'date rape' experience (00:48:45)

A Singaporean academic talking with a gay friend about being racially classified as an 'other' in Singapore instead of his previous status as an Indian, positioned after a scene of Jazz talking to her barmaid friend Sarah about a customer being rude to her because she's new in her job (00:22:51-00:26:22)

human experience through an improvised performative practice and then structure them through a compositional practice. If the shooting stage can be seen as prioritising the centrifugal, the editing stage can be seen as doing the same for the centripetal, exerting some control over the material to prevent the work from becoming too chaotic.

Reflecting on the process of writing the voice-over, which was a stage where the narrative focus of the film was sharpened and the narrative structure more precisely determined, the approach I took was to design sequences to invest a number of key images with dramatic and narrative impact. Some of the images I am referring to are:

Cigarette smoke floating through the air (00:22:42 and 01:12:22);  
Juggling (00:11:34, 00:12:13 and 01:12:38);  
A girl on a swing (00:52:28);  
Close-ups of bubbles in a glass of beer, and soapy suds in a sink (00:00:28 and 00:01:06).



It became increasingly prominent in my thinking as the process unfolded that these images reflected the heart of the film for me - imagery of the ephemeral - moving pictures that visually evoked the difficulty we have with dealing with the transience of life, with understanding and influencing the world we live in. They were the images that I wished to structure the narrative around as much as possible, because I felt they were visual metaphors that expressed an important focus of the film. On some level, I viewed these images as a visual representation of the question posed by the film's title, a question that the film explores, while never offering (and never intending to offer) any answers. This was perhaps more explicit as an issue for me as the filmmaker designing the structure of the narrative than for the audience watching the finished film. However, it is the case that I decided in post-production to highlight these images more than I had originally intended to.

There were also many other ephemeral moments captured in the filming that shared similar qualities, moments that I feel are more likely to occur taking an improvised approach but that are by no means confined to it. They can be the way an actor does something, a hesitation or digression, an ambiguous look, or the interaction between an actor and the world outside the constructed fiction of the production. They are moments that provide context and complexity to a character and situation. Through my research, I have given considerable thought to what the significance of these moments are to me and how they fit into my conception of screen narrative as a form of creative expression.

## **The filmic**

The filmic, then, lies precisely here, in that region where articulated language is no longer more than approximative and where another language begins (Barthes 1977, p. 65).

In his writing on visual signification in the 1970s, Roland Barthes discussed how there is something in the moving image that escapes signification. He called this the filmic. The ethnographic documentary filmmaker David MacDougall is also interested in this aspect of screen production and has discussed how Barthes' term points to something of importance to many filmmakers, particularly those that 'try to film people who are found to be remarkable within the contexts of ordinary life' (1998, p. 45). While Barthes suggests the filmic is rare, MacDougall sees it as 'the tacit part of our film experience, which allows us to "inhabit" the filmic environment. It is our sensory response to the content of film' (ibid., p. 49). As a filmmaker, he also stresses the importance of this element within the production process.

Filmmakers reach beyond the nameable and containable. It is the physical world underlying signification that provides the motive power of documentary and much of fiction film (ibid., pp. 48-49).

Throughout my research, I have been interested in what I describe as the 'cinematic moment', but have struggled to find writers who have provided insight into, or even addressed, this issue. However, MacDougall does explicitly engage with this aspect of the filmmaking and film viewing experience. He explains it as 'what we wait for when watching a film a second time, as we wait for certain moments in music. It may lie in a gesture, a look, in the catch of a voice, a puff of smoke, or a distant sound that animates a landscape' (ibid., p. 49).

The feeling conveyed by these moments underlies much of my interest in taking a more improvised approach to the production process. To highlight an example of this from *How To Change The World*, there was one take of a shot where Pete asks Jazz out while she is working behind the bar at the Junction Hotel.



As she re-enters the frame, she is thinking about whether to agree to his request. One of the three takes filmed was subtly different from the others, in that the actor hesitates in a certain way before answering, which from the moment I saw it at the editing stage I felt was important to include in the film, even if the other takes were more effective for other reasons (00:36:15). This is a brief moment that is easily missed and, in the overall context of the film narrative, more or less irrelevant. However, to me it is a moment that makes the narrative come alive, as do numerous similar instances in the film. It gives the scene a distinctive quality that cannot be scripted or duplicated. It reflects the way an individual person behaves in an individual moment, which, because it is a moment, can only be glimpsed before being lost in the movement of time. However, to me, these moments in time express something important about being human. The ability of film to record them is

a distinctive quality of the medium. Their brevity should not be allowed to obscure their importance.

MacDougall's discussion of the filmic is the closest I have come to a serious discussion of this aspect of the screen experience. As a writer on screen production and an ethnographic documentary filmmaker, he is aware of the filmmaker's perspective in attempting to convey the complexity of a human subject on screen. He also talks about what is commonly lost in the post-production process from the rushes stage to the final edit - 'spaciousness, context, and historicity' (1998, p. 216) – aspects of the narrative and the way it expresses human experience I was particularly interested in trying to convey. In my experience, 'filmic' moments are also often sacrificed to the demands of the narrative. While it is broadly accepted within the screen production industry that the editing process privileges relevance and economies of expression as principles in the structuring of most films, in my experience MacDougall is one of few writers who highlight what is lost with this approach. Like Bakhtin's concept of the 'centrifugal' in speech, MacDougall is arguing for the value of this digressive, intangible and unruly material, an argument I support and an approach that informed the production of *How To Change The World*, where I was actively interested in incorporating contradictory viewpoints into the narrative.

The experience of editing a film is full of tensions and contradictions. There is a will toward clarity and coherence, but this is resisted by an opposing will toward the unexpected and indeterminate. People in actual life are constantly improvising, but as the film subject becomes more simply and crudely delineated, there is less evidence of this human creativity. The filmmaker observes the hardening shell of a film persona, replacing the living person. There is both simplification and atrophy (MacDougall 1998, p. 42).

An example from *How To Change The World* relevant to this discussion is the scene I describe as the *girl on a swing* scene, where the character Jazz passes a children's playground returning home from an ill-fated night out, gets on a swing and swings backwards and forwards, higher and higher, for an extended time, while a little girl watches, waiting for her turn (00:52:28). The idea for this scene was something I personally witnessed and stuck with me as a powerful and evocative visual image. I thought this image could become a way to express the character's feelings at this stage of the story. I felt this scene highlighted the tension in editing most moving images between using only what was necessary to convey the story and focusing instead on those elements of the material that escape this narrative function.



I would argue the image of a young adult girl in party clothes swinging rather desperately in a child's playground has a connotative richness that to some extent is dependent on the narrative it is embedded in for its emotional impact but to some extent also escapes this

dependency. For me, isolated from the narrative, this sequence still has impact for its inherent visual qualities (such as the way it captures more abstract qualities of movement, colour and light) and the range of associations it evokes, many of which would be personal to individual viewers. I feel that allowing the sequence to run longer than is required for the purposes of the narrative provides an opportunity for these other qualities in the material to be appreciated by the audience. However, there is obviously the danger that audience members impatient for the narrative to proceed will feel bored. Nevertheless, I feel in a film like *How To Change The World*, this is an issue worth experimenting with.

In my experience making *How To Change The World*, because the process was more open and exploratory, because criteria of dramatic relevance were not determined in advance through a script and because the moment was favoured in the process through the absence of a pre-existing and determining narrative, the improvisational approach foregrounded the filmic. By this, I mean material whose interest for me as a filmmaker (and potentially for an audience) is not wholly tied to its significance within a narrative. The challenge this situation raises is how to integrate this often fragmentary material into a meaningful or satisfying work. Put another way, if an improvised approach puts the emphasis on the moment and less on the significance of the moment to a broader narrative, how then can you structure the narrative? In particular, how can you tell a story that satisfies an audience?

## **The world and its portrayal**

I had established that I could not tell a story based on the naturalist assumptions and the principles of temporal and spatial continuity that are central to the dominant mode of filmmaking practice exemplified by mainstream commercial cinema, television drama and most fictional screen narratives. There are many alternatives to this mode that have been explored. A number of the filmmakers that have been influential in my filmmaking practice are among these – directors such as Altman, Rivette and Rossellini. In the case of *How To Change The World*, I was interested in an approach that combined improvised scenes with a Brechtian-style voice over to give some narrative coherence to the various fragments I wanted to use. To some extent, this was modelled on the films of Alexander Kluge, who combines improvised drama sequences with both documentary and fantasy segments to convey stories that are both alive in the moment and densely contextualised socially, historically and politically. My approach was informed by a desire to integrate improvised performances into a narrative but also by a desire to explore further the issue of how screen narratives represent the world.

In reflecting on this, I was aware that the connection with Kluge's films does not explain everything about the style and structure of *How To Change The World*. For example, I have considered the way in which I was drawn to designing the narrative around certain key images, such as cigarette smoke and juggling. This was also a response to the challenge of developing a narrative without a traditional script and made me consider the influence of the film *Paisa* (1946), directed by Roberto Rossellini, on my filmmaking practice. I have already referred to this film in this exegesis in other contexts<sup>21</sup>. As a film viewer, it is very prominent in my personal canon<sup>22</sup> and I believe is deeply embedded in how I have developed as a filmmaker with my own perspective.

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<sup>21</sup> See pages 28-29

<sup>22</sup> I nominated *Paisa* as one of my ten top films in a list published in the journal *Senses of Cinema* in 1999: [http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/top\\_tens/archive00.html#listsdec99](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/top_tens/archive00.html#listsdec99)



## ***Paisa***



A recent significant contribution to the scholarly discussion about this film has been made by Allan Thomas (2009). *Paisa* is widely regarded as one of the key films of the Italian neo-realist movement. It was shot with a script but clearly has improvised elements in it. Many of the six short narratives that comprise the film were shot in Italian cities in the midst of the German army retreating at the end of the Second World War. Beyond the use of improvisation, the mixing of non-actors with actors and a blurring of documentary and drama are features that are relevant to *How To Change The World*. When I read Thomas's discussion of *Paisa*, one section in particular made me think of *How To Change The World*:

Its brusque stories and their offhand endings, the weakness of its causality and psychology, the incompleteness of its context and consequence, the fragmentary markers of motivation, and the consistent failure of communication (which offers its only thematic unity) are constitutive of both the realism and the humanism conventionally attributed to neo-realism – though not in the form they are usually conceived (Thomas 2009, pp. 4-5).

Whilst this sentence may seem like a litany of shortcomings in a film, Thomas discusses the concept of neo-realism in *Paisa*, drawing on work by Andre Bazin and Gilles Deleuze to argue that Bazin's use of the 'neo' in neo-realism was intended to signify a quite radical re-thinking of how cinematic stories relate to the world they depict.

a true realism in the cinema would consist not of the reproduction of a pre-existing world, but rather the recognition that 'the world' itself – understood as something we can grasp or master – is a fiction we impose on and against the real (Thomas 2009, p. 4).

In arguing that 'the real was no longer represented or reproduced, but aimed at' (Deleuze 1989, quoted in Thomas 2009, p. 4), Thomas offers both an ontological basis for this argument and a way to understand an approach to telling stories on screen (as modelled by *Paisa*) that is quite distinct from the psychological realism and cause-and-effect storytelling associated with mainstream cinema. In a way, this approach reflects many of the strategies I was attempting in *How To Change The World*, strategies designed to convey both the 'dispersive, elliptical' complexity of the world (Deleuze 1989, quoted in Thomas 2009, p. 4), as well as our incomplete and fragmentary understanding of it. In other words, a screen narrative focused not so much on making sense of the world but on our individual struggles as human beings to make sense of it.

The production of *How To Change The World* has confirmed my view that improvised performances are effective in conveying the shifting negotiation of meaning that people go through in their dealings with other people and the world. To me, the ability of motion pictures to capture this negotiation from moment to moment is one of the most powerful features of the medium that I value as a viewer and a filmmaker. Given that an improvised approach to screen production is inconsistent with approaches designed to convey a spatially and temporally consistent world, both Thomas and Bakhtin present different ways of conceptualising how a film like *How To Change The World*, constructed as it is from improvised fragments, can nevertheless be seen to be presenting a meaningful view of the world.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The central question this research investigated is how a creative practice in screen production can be transformed into a research practice, which integrates professional, cultural and academic experience. I believe this question can only be answered by an integrated consideration of both the screen work and the accompanying material that has been submitted. The production of the film *How To Change The World*, and the reading and reflection generated by the research process, have together enabled me to identify and develop a body of concepts that allow me to frame my practice in new and meaningful ways. I would also argue the theoretical frameworks I have applied to my practice reflect the specificity of the screen production process and contribute to legitimising the domain of knowledge in which I practice - the domain of screen production.

Using reflective practice as a methodology, the making of the film was accompanied by a systematic process of documenting my thoughts and ideas, as well as a search for theorists whose ideas resonated with the practice. This search produced many dead-ends but over time allowed me to identify a number of writers, such as Bourdieu, Bakhtin and Schön, whose theories enabled me to conceptualise my practice in new ways. I would describe all these writers as theorists of practice. It is through their emphasis on acts of 'doing' and 'making' in professional, creative and cultural contexts that I felt they were relevant to the field of screen production and have enabled me to explore this field as an academic research practice.

It was clear from the beginning of this research that improvisation in performances was a major focus of the project. However, it became increasingly apparent through the research that improvisation is a more broadly significant concept in my practice. It is a key concept in the work of Bourdieu, Schön, Holland et. al. and Bakhtin, used to convey how individuals act in situations of social practice. Aside from being crucial to how the actors performed in the film, it became clear that an understanding of improvisation was important for understanding my own attempts to deal with the production environment. Research diaries that were kept through the project identified 'scrambling' as a major theme in my reflections on the production process, a theme that reflects the improvisational exigencies of constant adaptation and negotiation in the context of changing circumstances. Improvisation was also central to the behaviour of the crew and indeed could be used to understand the behaviour of the fictional characters within the narrative of *How To Change The World*, which could reasonably be described as a story dramatising the issue of agency. I would argue that the concept of improvisation is also central to an understanding of reflective practice research more broadly. It is used consistently in the writings of Bourdieu (1980, p. 57) and Schön (1983, pp. 55-56), as fundamental to an understanding of the specificity of practice as a form of knowledge.

A related focus of this research was on issues of identity and agency within the field of screen production. Within the broad framework of ideas proposed by Bourdieu in his work on the field of cultural production and drawing on related theorists such as Schön and cultural anthropologists Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, I have argued that the screen production process for *How To Change The World* was a complex social, cultural and technical environment where I needed to negotiate multiple and often competing priorities in executing creative ideas, often under the pressure of considerable time and resource constraints. The choices made in this improvisational environment were informed by both the history of my positions within the field, in both mainstream and marginal micro-budget sectors, as well as my dispositions to make certain types of films. These dispositions in turn were informed by a range of influences. I investigated the different ways that influences such as key films I have viewed and prior production experiences can be seen to have an impact on the current creative production process. Like Schön's 'surfacing of tacit knowledge'

(1983, pp. 49-56), I investigated how my identity as a filmmaker informed the myriad creative and practical decisions made in the screen production process and whether a more explicit awareness of that identity enhanced my agency in the process, agency in this context being understood as the ability to act independently of the accepted and often internalised norms of the field.

Holland et. al. conceive of agency in cultural worlds as a precondition to imagining these worlds differently (1998, pp. 267-269). To the extent that the reflective practice research undertaken in this project contributes to my agency as a screen practitioner, it could be seen to confirm the value of the process. The film at the centre of this research, *How To Change The World*, allowed me through both practice and reflection to explore approaches to production that would be challenging to undertake outside the research context of this project. I was able to experiment with a range of production methods and document that process, building a repertoire of strategies that can be applied to my practice in the future (Schön 1983, p. 315).

The research project offered an opportunity to explore the area of micro-budget screen production. This is a style of production that imposes many constraints on filmmakers through a lack of resources. However, this is countered by the opportunities it offers to experiment with content, style and production approaches, taking creative risks without the consequences of a significant financial investment being at stake. There is evidence that micro-budget production is increasing in an era where digital production technology is becoming widely accessible and screen production literacies becoming more widespread. In this context, the knowledge I have gained about the process through this research may be of value to others, for example, in my examination of the ethical issues involving participants in the production.

The issue of ethics is also an example of the tensions between academic and professional contexts that the research project highlighted. Resolving these tensions was important in conceiving of a viable space in which screen production research can develop, a field of practice where questions of relevance to both the academic and professional communities can be explored. Making a contribution to debates around what being a screen production scholar/practitioner involves and the emerging academic field of screen production research are both immediate and longer-term objectives for this researcher.

In other respects I also believe this research has relevance for the professional screen production sector. Anecdotally, the use of improvisation in screen performances is increasing, once more related to the increasing use of digital production technology. The research attempted to analyse the qualities in improvised performances that make them compelling in screen drama, beyond their common designation as 'spontaneous'. The research also considered the tensions and dynamics between the needs of crew and cast in the screen production process, which exist as an issue with or without the presence of a budget. The film explored options to resolve these tensions, within the improvised production approach being used.

*How To Change The World* modelled an approach to the production process that was explicitly trying to reduce the emphasis on control at the shooting stage. My experience in the production of the film suggests that such an approach has potentially far reaching consequences for both the production process and the outcomes of that process. It affects the working and organisation of the production personnel, as well as the style and content of the story that can be told. My engagement with concepts of improvisation has led to a questioning of the nature of the relationship between screen stories and the world they seek to represent. Based on my research, I believe it can open up possibilities for new forms of storytelling on screen.

While it might be said that what I am arguing for is little different from the application of documentary techniques and production processes to fictional material, I believe this does not adequately conceptualise the issue. If it ever was the case, the distinctions between documentary and drama production techniques, styles and content are increasingly blurring. To me, it is more useful to think about the issue in relation to concepts of control: between approaches to the production process that seek to execute a detailed pre-existing plan as faithfully as possible and those that are more open and exploratory, that seek to engage with the moment, the other contributors involved, the community and the world in which the film is being made.

In conceptualising my practice, I found that the application of Bakhtin's central concept of dialogism was useful in framing and clarifying key aspects of my approach to screen drama, where the emphasis is less on communicating a coherent pre-defined meaning and more on creating a structure where a range of voices and ideas can be expressed (1981). In my view, Bakhtin's discussion of dialogism in relation to speech acts in particular, and to language and meaning in society more generally, seems to have significant parallels with my experience of the way improvisation functions within screen production: that meaning is not fixed but rather created through a process of constant and shifting negotiation between multiple participants. The creative process can be seen as a conversation between the people involved in the production, in the same way that meaning in the final screen text can be seen as a dialogue with the audience.

The film, exegesis and supporting material produced as part of this research can together be understood as what Schön would describe as a 'frame analysis' (1983, p. 309), presenting my way of doing things in a form that can be of use to others. 'Conversational' seems an appropriate term to describe this frame, in attempting to meaningfully synthesise the various elements of my creative practice in the production of *How To Change The World*. It relates to Bakhtin's concept of the 'dialogic' but is more informal, more quotidian and therefore, in the context of the film, more suitable. In a similar vein, I could also describe my method as a centrifugal approach to narrative, with multiple dramatic components addressing the audience in a range of voices, rather than a focused, linear one (Bakhtin 1981, p. 272). In this approach, multiple viewpoints, digressions and a looser interpretation of dramatic relevance are used to express the dispersive, contested and contradictory nature of social experience, where situations are unresolved and individual problems are understood as determined by both personal agency and broader social/historical forces. In the context of this research project, a conversational approach to the story has been paralleled by a similar approach to both the screen production process and the research process.

Another way I have viewed my contribution to the discipline through this research is in proposing a methodology for research in screen production practice. This methodology involves developing an understanding of the practitioner's identity through an analysis of their dispositions and positions within the field of screen production (Bourdieu 1993, p. 61), then examining how that identity is evidenced in the decision-making that occurs in the production process. This methodology has been applied to my practice in the production of the film *How To Change The World*, leading to the development of a framework of ideas for understanding this practice in new ways, a framework I have described as 'conversational'.

It needs to be acknowledged that the conversational approach I have been investigating has not been applied to the post-production process. At this stage of the process, as the author/editor of the work, I exercised a great deal of control over the material, while striving to respect the diverse perspectives in the material that had been recorded. As a focus for future research, I believe there would be value in seeing whether a conversational approach to the post-production stages of the screen production process can be usefully applied. It does, however, raise the question of, once the shooting is over, who this

conversation should be with? Perhaps, in an academic research environment, a community of peers.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix I ... Script outlines for *How To Change The World*

### How To Change The World - Drama Segment Synopsis

#### Max's Story (May 7, 2006):

When Norm has a stroke, his sense of smell becomes intense. Lying paralysed on his kitchen floor, he can smell beer coming in through the open window. He knows the smell is from the Junction Hotel down the road. Max, the publican, is expecting Norm and pours him a beer, knowing Norm will be there before the chill has left the glass. But Norm is not going anywhere. All he can do is watch the lace curtains on the open kitchen window waft lazily in the breeze. And keep smelling the beer.

Max knows something is wrong when Norm doesn't show up. It is a quiet afternoon at the pub so he goes round to check. Max gets Norm to hospital without delay but Norm doesn't make it. He'd been coming to the pub for over twenty years, so from then on, Max pours him a drink at the same time every afternoon and leaves it on Norm's favourite table in the corner.

Norm's death is the loss of only one customer, albeit a very steady drinker, but around this time Max starts to realise he has got into a routine and, without realising it, the routine has gone on for decades. Life can be like that, he thinks. It gives you the impression that things are stable, predictable, that today will be like yesterday. But takings are down and Max knows he can't afford the building maintenance to keep the place looking smart. Business had been slow before but then picked up. It went in cycles. So how can you tell when the cycle turns into a slide, a slide that keeps going all the way to oblivion?

Phil, the Junction's long time dishwasher, walks out because the pay is not regular enough. Max hires a uni student called Lynette as Phil's replacement. When Max mentions the pay might occasionally be a day or two late, Lynette laughs and comments on what a pathetic joke of a business this must be. Max says they are going through a hard time but the other staff are understanding. Listening in, the barman says 'bullshit' and walks out. Then a barmaid says 'I'm going too'. Lynette watches in amazement but hangs around. She is either sorry for Max or keen to watch him suffer.

Max also gets plenty of advice from Tony, a slightly dishevelled businessman passing through, who has a drink and says he senses imminent bankruptcy. Tony knows that feeling well, so Max pours him another drink and tries to get some friendly business advice. Amongst other things, Tony talks about the importance of juggling in a successful business practice. He gives Max a few financial tips and also sells him some juggling balls before he moves on.

That night, after closing time, Lynette watches Max practise his juggling as she finishes the dishes. After he goes home, Jim the cleaner arrives. Jim, who seems highly eccentric and slightly creepy, advises her not to hang around for too long. When she asks why, he tells her about the two journalists who drank themselves to death at the pub. Their ghosts now reside in the storage cupboard where Jim keeps his mops and detergent. Lynette laughs uneasily but leaves soon after, so that Jim has the pub to himself.

The next day, Max attends Norm's funeral. The only people there are a group of regular customers from the Junction. Max gives the eulogy. He describes Norm as a happy pessimist. He always felt that things would turn out badly but he wasn't going to let it get

him down. He says times like this make you wonder about the meaning of it all. Norm didn't have any achievements. He didn't have any family. The only friends he had were his mates at the pub. He certainly didn't have any money. What Max remembers about Norm are the little things, like the odd ties he wore, and the strange things, like the way he always went the long way to the toilets at the back of the pub. It was almost like he had a fear of the cleaning cupboard in the back corridor.

After the funeral, Max is speaking to two old regulars, Jean and her husband Frank. He says the pub was the centre of Norm's life. He wonders how long he can keep the pub open. Jean says it isn't rocket science. He has to get more young customers and he won't do that unless he changes things. Frank says confidently that Max is too old to change and lights up a cigarette. As the smoke he exhales drifts off into the distance, Max and Jean discuss how he could attract a younger crowd.

In a shock to everybody, it turns out that Norm actually had lots of cash stashed away in his laundry. From time to time, he speculated in foreign exchange transactions. He leaves it all to Max, with instructions in his will to keep the pub open for as long as possible. Max decides the only way he can do this is to remake the Junction. The money from Norm will allow him to pay off his debts, give the pub a facelift and keep it running for a few months, until he can attract some new customers.

Max seeks professional advice from a business consultant. However, the message is not positive. The consultant provides a detailed analysis of the plight of the small independent operator. He lays out Max's options, which include familiar alternatives that Max can't stomach, such as introducing poker machines. When Max complains about the lack of hope the consultant is offering him, he gets told bluntly that what he wants is not viable in the modern world. Max also asks the people he knows for advice. Lynette says he has no idea and is totally out of touch. He should get out and see a few real pubs, that are pulling crowds and making money. Max researches his competition and studies the theories of modern pub management. He analyses the internal and external environment. Then he makes his plans.

Max launches the Progress Bar, with the old regulars watching sceptically from their tables in the corner and a few new customers checking it out. As soon as the band starts up, the regulars leave, muttering about headaches and hearing loss, except for Jean, who sticks it out. One regular tells Max 'This is not what Norm wanted'. Max has a talk to Jean after the show. She encourages him to persevere. The others don't want the world to change but the world is not listening. Max says that maybe they just don't like the way it's changing. Jean keeps coming to the Progress Bar. Her marriage to Frank does not seem to have much love in it and her friendship with Max seems to have levels of unspoken feeling that neither of them are fully aware of. Max tells her that he is keeping Norm's old table in the corner reserved for the old regulars, if they ever decide to come back.

Then one day Jean doesn't turn up. Max visits her. When he arrives, the atmosphere seems tense. Max asks Jean if anything is wrong. She says she has just been diagnosed with lung cancer and will have to start treatment in hospital immediately. Max asks if she was a smoker and Jean says no. Jean does not seem to want to talk about her situation and Max respects this. Jean asks Max how the pub is going. Max says business is picking up but he can't see the point in persevering if the old regulars don't come back – they are the people he is making this effort for. As they are talking, Jean's husband Frank comes in and lights up a cigarette. Max stares from Frank to Jean. Jean obviously knows what Max is thinking but Frank seems unaware of it.

Back at the Progress Bar, Max is struggling to adapt to the requirements of his new customers. Taking orders at the restaurant, Max can't bear people who are constantly



personalising the menu with their fussy diet requirements. He loses his cool with one customer, his initial good-humoured response suddenly boiling over in anger. Max is mad with himself and hurries to the kitchen to calm down. The chef tells him not to worry – the mark of a classy restaurant is the flexibility it shows its customers. While he is there, a waitress comes in with an order from another table. She asks the chef if he can do sausages and mash. The chef is a bit shocked and says no. Max looks out the kitchen door. A group of old regulars are sitting at their table, including Frank. Max looks at the chef and asks him just how classy this restaurant is.

Shortly after, Max brings the regulars the meals they asked for and gives them a warm welcome back. He asks Frank how Jean is going. Frank says as well as can be expected. A bit later, Max notices that Frank has gone out the back. He is standing on his own, staring into the distance. He then pulls out a cigarette and has a smoke, lost in his thoughts.

## **How To Change The World - Drama Segment Synopsis**

### **Claire's Story (May 7, 2006):**

**(Note: This character was renamed Jazz after an actor was cast in the role)**

Claire is hired by Max as one of the new waitresses at the pub. She is an international student studying in Melbourne. Under the conditions of her student visa, she can only work 20 hours a week but Claire is having trouble paying her fees so she has taken on a second job. Despite her tiredness, Claire enjoys her work at the pub. It has more life than the office building she cleans in the middle of the night and Claire is curious to find out more about Australian life.

Claire gets some help from Sarah, who is a regular barmaid at the pub. She explains how it is often better to deal with troublesome customers through humour than anger. Sarah also talks a lot about her personal life and the wild things she gets up to when she goes out. These stories are an eye-opener for Claire, who comes from a socially conservative culture in a developing country.

When she gets home from her first night at the pub, Claire has an email from her mother suggesting she may have to come home – the area she lives in has been flooded and her family home has been destroyed. Her parents need help and will have a lot of trouble contributing to her fees.

At uni, Claire goes to class. She talks to her friend Nicholas, who is also an international student. Claire has failed a couple of assignments and is struggling to keep up with what is required. Nicholas says he knows someone who sells high scoring assignments from the year before. Claire seems tempted but doesn't commit.

Towards closing time the next night, a young man who has been coming to the pub starts chatting to Claire. He then asks her out. Pete works in advertising and is both charming and friendly. Despite her generally cautious nature, Claire agrees. She tells Sarah she wants to experience things a young woman would never be able to do in her home country.

Pete takes her shopping. He says he needs advice on some new clothes he is buying. Pete seems to have plenty of money and spends it extravagantly, which both shocks and fascinates Claire. She comes from a culture where you only buy what you need. In a polite and light-hearted way, she suggests he is a crazy consumer and that it is a problem to have too much choice. At the end of their shopping trip, Pete buys her an I-pod. He says you can put

10,000 songs on it. Claire says why would you possibly want to do that? But at his insistence, she reluctantly agrees to accept it.

Pete persuades her to go out for dinner with him and some friends the next night after work. Claire doesn't drink but she decides to give it a go. She is feeling tired and desperate about her immediate future. She increasingly loses control as the night progresses. She wakes up the next morning with Pete in her apartment, next to her in bed. He is fast asleep, so she quietly puts her party clothes back on and goes out.

Claire walks through a park nearby, deep in thought. She is drawn to an empty playground, where she sits down on the swing. Her gentle rocking increases and the swing gets higher and higher. An elderly Chinese lady comes along with a little Chinese girl. It seems the girl would like a go on the swing, because she and the old lady sit down on the edge of the playground and watch Claire, in her party dress and dark glasses, swinging recklessly back and forth, higher and higher. They wait for a long time but Claire swings on. In the end, they give up and go home.

On her next shift at the pub, Pete comes up to Claire and wants to talk to her. He seems completely shocked when Claire politely says she does not want to see him any more. When he pushes her for reasons, Claire says his world is not for her and that, ultimately, she doesn't care enough for him.

In the days and nights that follow, Claire becomes aware that Pete has taken her rejection of him badly and that he is, in fact, stalking her. He is hanging around the pub and her home, following her in the street and leaving endless messages on her phone. Claire becomes increasingly anxious and fearful about Pete's irrational possessiveness. She talks about the situation with her uni friend Nicholas and says she will almost be relieved if her parents tell her to come home. They see Pete watching them in the distance. Nicholas offers to escort her to work at the pub and Claire agrees.

Crossing the car park outside the pub, Pete suddenly walks towards Claire and Nicholas. As they get close, Pete pulls out a knife, lunges at Claire and stabs her. Claire staggers and falls to the ground. Nicholas wrestles with Pete and some other pub customers who have seen what has happened. When Pete has been subdued, Nicholas rushes over to Claire. She is frantically feeling her side, then looks up at him, unexpectedly smiles and sits up - the knife hit the I-pod in her pocket, which saved her life.

Arriving home, Claire puts the wrecked I-pod on her kitchen table. Checking her emails, she gets a message that her family wants her to stay in Australia and continue her studies. Her family have also sent a photo of themselves and their flooded family home. Claire sits there staring at them on the computer.

**Appendix 2** ... Berkeley, L 2009, 'The anonymous actor - ethics and screen production research', ASPERA: 2009 Conference Papers, Stokes, J (ed.), The Australian Screen Production Education & Research Association (ASPERA), Adelaide, viewed 1 August 2011, <<http://www.aspera.org.au/node/41>>.

## **2009 ASPERA Conference**

### **The Anonymous Actor – Ethics and Screen Production Research**

**Author: Leo Berkeley**

#### **Abstract:**

All research in Australian universities involving human participants needs approval from human research ethics committees, who make judgments consistent with accepted ethical principles that have recently been captured in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007). Making a film as an academic research project is a relatively recent phenomenon and there are apparent contradictions between the requirements for ethics approval and the accepted practice of screen production.

As an illustration of these contradictions, typical requirements to gain ethics approval are for research participants to be anonymous, have the right of withdrawal at any time and be able to withdraw their data at any time, if that is possible. Is it viable to make a fiction film as research on these terms if the actors are defined as research participants and their data is their performance?

This paper will look at the apparent mismatch between the application of ethics in academic research and the practice of screen production, reflecting on my recent experience making the film *How To Change The World* as a higher degree by research project. It will examine questions of definition, such as whether the actors and crew on a film should be considered research participants and whether making a distinction between publishing the creative work and publishing the research is a viable way forward. While Human Research Ethics Committees do not commonly make unreasonable demands in resolving these issues for screen production researchers, the paper will argue there is value in clarifying the status of screen production research in relation to ethics approval and encouraging greater consistency in the operation of the ethics approval process in this area.

#### **Bio:**

Leo Berkeley is the Discipline Head, Media within the School of Media & Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. He also has considerable experience as an independent filmmaker, having written and directed the feature film, *Holidays on the River Yarra*, which was an official selection for the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. More recently he has developed an interest in a new media form called “machinima”. A machinima work he produced, *Ending With Andre*, screened at the 2005 Machinima Film Festival in New York. In 2008 he also made a micro-budget feature film called *How To Change The World*.

## Introduction

My personal background is as a filmmaker who took up teaching film and TV production at university level. After some time in this role, I was then encouraged to undertake a higher degree by research, which I chose to do by researching my own practice in the making of a no-budget feature film drama. In transforming a creative and professional practice into a research practice, I have found the issue of ethics to be both important and difficult.

All research in Australian universities involving human participants needs approval from human research ethics committees, who make judgments consistent with accepted ethical principles that have recently been captured in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007). However, as a screen production practitioner, it was clear when I began my higher degree by research involving the production of a fiction film, that there were some apparent contradictions between the application of ethics in academic research and the accepted practice of screen production. For example, supporting documents for ethics approval applicants suggest a typical requirement is for research participants to be anonymous (RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, 2008, p. 4). So I had to consider the question – ‘are my actors research participants?’ and, if so, ‘is their data their performances?’ Their role was different to people who participate in interviews, focus groups, surveys or scientific experiments. Perhaps they could be regarded as co-researchers, or in some way external to the research? In my experience, some people making films as part of their research have argued that the research is only that component that fits within the accepted ethics model, such as interviews.

To some extent, the answer to this question boils down to your research design and methodology. But, if your methodology is reflective practice, as it was in my case, then you are usually arguing that the practice is part of the research. So I came to the conclusion that my actors had to be regarded as research participants. Then I read the guidelines on anonymity in relation to research participants and wondered about my actors, who it was clear wanted to be seen and heard by as many people as possible. How would they feel if I told them that I was going to protect their privacy by keeping their performances locked securely in a filing cabinet in my office for five years? I briefly thought about the ethical issues involved in a group of actors assaulting their director. After that, I got on with muddling through the process as best I could, trying to reconcile what I was planning to do with a very formal and time-consuming process.

Looking back, I did not actually have any major problems with gaining ethics approval. The committee I dealt with seemed to accept the approach I was proposing for resolving my needs with their requirements. Why I wanted to raise this issue in this paper is not so much because I am unhappy with the actual conduct of the ethics approval process, but because I feel there is a need for the process to better reflect the nature of practice-based research with a creative and performative focus. If you look at the definition of research contained within the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007), it includes the generation of ‘images’ and ‘performances’ (p. 6) but the principles and guidelines detailed in every other part of the document seem to take little account of the specific needs of this type of research. I think there is a mismatch between the current focus of academic research ethics and the emerging field of screen production research that it would be good to address. In this paper I would like explore the problem and outline some possible ways forward.

## The principle of informed consent & participants’ rights

The ethical principles of academic research focus on the protection of vulnerable people and imbalances of power in the relationship between researcher and participant. These are extremely important issues and filmmakers, particularly documentary filmmakers, are by no

means immune from them. In a lot of ways, the subjects of a documentary are closer to the traditional concept of a research participant so a lot of my focus here is more relevant to drama production. There are two main reasons why I think this area is one that should be addressed. The first is that the current situation unnecessarily makes the process a chore, an exercise in administrative compliance that in my view gets in the way of a serious engagement with the substantive issues. The ethics approval process is a lot of work and, for it to be taken seriously by researchers, it should better reflect the nature of what they do.

The second concern I have is that the current situation reinforces the impression that screen production is not a serious research discipline. I think it is important for filmmakers and for creative arts researchers in general to be more widely recognised as legitimate researchers and this is one area where I think action could be taken to raise awareness of what screen production researchers do. Peak bodies such as the Australian Screen Production Education & Research Association (ASPERA) could quite conceivably play a role in this and I would like to suggest that the association think about developing ethics guidelines that more specifically reflect the situation of filmmakers undertaking practice-based research.

Where in the accepted ethics approval process are there problems for filmmaker/researchers? And are there ethics issues specific to screen production that are not adequately covered by the existing process? I have now successfully made three ethics applications but the main one I will be drawing on in this discussion involves the production of a film I made as a PhD project. The film is a feature length drama called *How To Change The World*. It is what I would describe as a micro-budget production, by which I mean that no-one involved was paid.

Informed consent is a key concept in the ethics approval process for academic research. Through a Plain Language Statement, all research participants are informed about the objectives of the research, the nature of their involvement and their rights as participants. On the basis of this information, they are asked to sign a consent form. Participants' rights commonly include the protection of their privacy, the right to withdraw from the research at any time and the right to be protected from sensitive or emotionally stressful issues.

### **Privacy & Anonymity**

The focus on privacy and anonymity in relation to research participants is obviously problematic when applied to actors and crew. Actors do not seek anonymity. However, thinking through the various dimensions of the research while making *How To Change The World*, I started to feel the issue of anonymity was a more complex one, in a way that highlighted some basic tensions in relation to screen production as research. What is the film production, what is the research, and to what extent are they the same or different? (Bell, 2006; Peters, 2005; Millard, 2008; Berkeley, 2008). While I was making a film for public exhibition, I was also researching the process and planning to publish the findings. In this context, I may want to discuss failures as well as successes in relation to areas like performance, technical execution and cast/crew collaboration. Did an actor's agreement to participate in the film include this type of publication and was it appropriate to identify individual crew and cast in these discussions? On reflection, I felt I needed to make a distinction in relation to publication, between 'publishing' the film and publishing the research findings. Although my research methodology was reflective practice, I was not arguing that the film expressed the research findings on its own. I therefore submitted that participants would not be identified in publication of the research, unless they gave permission.

I also tried to think through this issue from a filmmaker/researcher point of view – what are the ethical issues around privacy for the cast and crew in a film? I came to the conclusion that the situation should more appropriately be the opposite of the accepted approach. In screen production, participants should have the right to fair publicity. In my experience, a major area of ethical contention in screen production is around the issue of participants receiving fair credit for their contribution. On all productions, but especially in the low and no budget area, one of the main motivations for people to participate is to ‘get a credit’ that will demonstrate their ability and help to get further work.

I have had student filmmakers sneak into edit suites in the middle of the night to change credits because of real or perceived disputes over roles. I also know of disputes on professional feature films where credits are changed to distort or diminish the contribution of participants who do not have the power to influence how roles are described or positioned - for example, a co-producer who finished up with a credit at the end of a long credit roll, his name in a tiny font size following all the assistants and extras. As Perebinosoff (2008, pp. 66-67) has outlined, within the Hollywood film production sector there are a number of recent high-profile cases of disputes in relation to credits. In many respects, the issue of credits is more significant for participants than payment.

### ***Right of Withdrawal***

The right of withdrawal is another area where I think there are problems for filmmaker/researchers that need to be clarified. The default position in the ethics approval process is for research participants to have right of withdrawal at any time (N.H.M.R.C., A.R.C., and A.V.C.C. 2007, p. 20; RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, 2008, p. 4). However, an actor pulling out of a film drama half-way through shooting is normally considered a catastrophic event. It is hard to imagine a production surviving such a setback. In the professional film production environment, the risks involved with this issue are managed contractually. In any contract of employment, you still cannot prevent people from leaving, although the financial rewards involved presumably act as a disincentive to leave. However, the *National Statement* views an employer/employee relationship as a concern: ‘No person should be subject to coercion or pressure in deciding whether to participate’ (N.H.M.R.C., A.R.C., and A.V.C.C. 2007, p. 20). The document identifies teacher/student and employer/employee relationships as two examples where the voluntary character of participants’ decisions may be compromised, as they typically involve unequal status, where one party has or has had a position of influence or authority over the other.

This issue highlights the debate over whether practice-led research in screen production and professional practice in screen production are the same activity or different. When we talk about making films as research, we are of course talking about a range of possible situations. There are no budget films and no participant films. It is fairly common for films made as research to have a dual status – funded by broadcasters for example, with the filmmaker also deciding to do the production as a higher degree research project. These films would happen even if there were no research. Can you argue that this pre-existing professional context changes the nature of the filmmaker’s ethical responsibilities? It could also be argued that the accepted professional agreements that govern the participation of cast and crew adequately meet the ethical requirements of the research. However, should ethical practice set a higher standard than minimum legal requirements?

### ***How ethical should you be?***

I do not always succeed but I aspire to be an ethical person and an ethical researcher. When I started thinking the ethics process through, I wanted it to be more than an exercise in administrative compliance. Unfortunately, ethics is one of those issues that, once you start thinking about it, it is hard to know where to stop. At a certain point I was considering if I

had an ethical responsibility to my fictional characters. As Carlin (2009) highlights in relation to ethics issues he encountered in the writing of creative non-fiction as academic research, when a researcher is operating in fields involving the application of creativity and imagination, a significant amount of the terminology and concepts used in official documents is not well-aligned with the practice of the research, resulting in both researchers and ethics committees getting little guidance or support in resolving philosophically challenging ethical issues. Other literature on this issue (Booth, W. C., Colomb G.G. & Williams, J. M., 2003; Pritchard, 2006) and certainly the *National Statement* (N.H.M.R.C., A.R.C., and A.V.C.C. 2007, p. 13) supports Carlin in stressing that the ethics process is not about rules but about principles such as justice, respect and beneficence, that are meant to guide and inform your engagement with often complex and messy human situations.

### ***Sensitive or emotionally stressful issues***

This leads me onto the final example of participants' rights that I wanted to discuss, which is the protection of participants if the research raises sensitive or emotionally stressful issues. In traditional forms of research, participants have the right to be protected from situations like this. While in documentary film production there would be many circumstances where this would be a critical issue, the situation in relation to drama is less clear-cut. After all, actors commonly engage with sensitive and emotionally stressful situations in their portrayal of characters but most people would argue their engagement is informed and voluntary – if they take on a role that involves stressful situations, that is their choice and they have to accept the consequences. However, my experience once more suggested the situation is more complex.

There was a scene in *How To Change The World* that involved nudity. In this case, the actors were well-informed in advance, gave consent but then changed their minds at the time of shooting the scene. This highlights for me the importance of raising potentially stressful situations beforehand and saying to actors that support will be available if they become uncomfortable. In my case, the situation was not specifically addressed in the Plain Language Statement and so there were no explicit procedures in place to deal with what was clearly an ethical issue that needed to be handled sensitively. The scene had been discussed with the actors in detail beforehand and there had been numerous direct opportunities for them to express any concerns. The actors were unambiguously in agreement with the degree of nudity planned. However, as the shooting began, reservations were expressed about what had been agreed. I asked my female first assistant director to discuss these concerns with the actors. The scene was ultimately shot with less nudity than had been planned, which, as director, I did not have a problem with. However, it was easy to see how a situation such as this could be handled differently, with pressure applied to the performers to stick to what had been agreed, regardless of how they felt. If I had pushed my original wishes for the scene, perhaps the actors' reservations would have been overcome, with a better creative outcome for the film. Where should the line be drawn in relation to ethical behaviour? I erred on the side of caution but, taken too far, this approach could result in creative work that is bland and unchallenging. In my experience, the only thing clear is that there is no clear answer to these ethical dilemmas that can be applied in every situation.

My experience during the shooting of this scene highlighted the ambiguity around ethical issues that I encountered on numerous occasions during my research. In what is unarguably a more substantial and sombre context, Kellehear (1989) has written in relation to this issue in an article about the ethics of research work while doing a doctoral project on the social experience of the dying. In his development as a sociologist, Kellehear describes how his theoretical interest in social taboos (such as sexuality, madness and death) led him to his doctoral project, which involved interviewing around one hundred patients dying of cancer. While conducting this research in a hospital environment, a range of ethical dilemmas arose,

many of which challenged a narrow interpretation of accepted principles about not 'interfering with people' when conducting research.

The hospital's ethics committee gave approval for the research on the basis of patients giving informed consent and the research doing them no harm. Kellehear discusses the principle of 'no harm' in depth, vividly describing individual cancer patients who wished to participate in the research despite the obvious anguish and pain involved. He argues that the research relationship was inherently traumatising, which could be regarded as a form of harm. However, despite this, nearly all participants still wanted to be involved, motivated by a desire to tell their story. Kellehear presents the arguments for and against conducting research in this situation and argues that, both for the patients involved, the researcher and society in general, there are benefits that may outweigh the risks of 'doing harm'.

The HREC in my case did not mandate an approach that did 'no harm', instead framing the ethical issues as a balance between risks and benefits. In his article, Kellehear suggests the ethics guidelines of bodies such as the American Sociological Association encourage a 'checklist' mentality that does not prepare researchers well for the ethical subtleties and complexities encountered in the field. While not advocating an 'ethics of convenience', Kellehear proposes setting minimum standards of acceptable conduct while viewing ethics as a way of responsibly 'seeing and interpreting relationships' within the human complexities of the research context.

In relation to my experience with the production of *How To Change The World*, like Kellehear, I was confronted with a formal ethics approval process that did not seem to adequately reflect the nature of my research. The HREC I dealt with did not raise any major objections to my application. In fact, they seemed quite sensitive to the methodological specificity of my creative practice research. Nonetheless, the performative and professional contexts in which screen production is practised raise complex ethical issues that researchers need to grapple with and that I believe a university ethics approval process could more effectively facilitate. The lack of connection between the formal requirements of the process and the actual practice of screen production research created unnecessary obstacles to my engagement with the ethical concerns involved. In the first instance, effectively integrating a cast and crew agreement with an ethics consent form, which addressed the issues I have raised here, would be a worthwhile step towards making the ethics approval process for screen practitioners less complicated and more meaningful.

## **Conclusion**

It is likely that screen production as research will become more common in the future. It is conceivable that we may find academics making films that are funded primarily as research, by organizations such as the Australian Research Council. In this situation, it will be hard to argue that ethics is a secondary or marginal add-on to the 'real business' of the production. However, given the various issues on which there seems to be a lack of clarity, I would argue for screen production researchers to have some additional guidance in relation to ethics approval.

In my view, the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* is a sound basis on which to frame the process of ethics approval in Australian universities, with its emphasis on the key underlying principles of respect, beneficence and justice (N.H.M.R.C., A.R.C., and A.V.C.C. 2007 pp. 12-13). However, it is by its nature a general document and focuses on the more established forms of research when discussing specific examples. This leaves screen production research, as an emerging field, up in the air in some key areas. However, the *National Statement* also suggests the possibility for specific research disciplines to develop their own guidelines:



This National Statement does not exhaust the ethical discussion of human research. There are, for example, many other specialised ethical guidelines and codes of practice for specific areas of research. (p. 11)

In light of the issues I have raised in this paper, I would argue that screen production is an area of research that would greatly benefit from its own ethics code of practice being developed. In my own attempts to match up my research with the existing ethics approval process, two areas were highlighted as in need of clarification. The *National Statement* does not include any reference to the status of creative or professional collaborators, which is how I would regard the actors and crew on one of my films. Nor does it include any reference to a researcher and participant being the same person, which was my situation when I did my practice-led research and is, I imagine, how many other creative practice researchers approach their work. I think both these areas need to be addressed if screen production researchers are going to develop appropriate ethics guidelines for participants in their research.

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### **Appendix 3** ... Camera and lighting notes for *How To Change The World*.

#### **How To Change The World - Character Colour Spectrum (Wardrobe)**

Max

Blue to yellow (cold to warm)

Jazz

Grey to Red

Jean

Yellow to blue (warm to cold)

Pete

Light shades to dark shades

Lynette

Black and white

#### **Visual themes**

Max's story

Light – Blue to orange (cold to warm); Low contrast to high contrast

Camera – Static to moving

Jazz's story

Light – Blue to orange (cold to warm); Low contrast to high contrast

Camera - Claire needs to be visually isolated from her environment through focus (long lens and shallow DOF) and framing. After swing scene make her less isolated.

#### **Appendix 4 ... Synopsis of the film *How To Change The World*.**

*How To Change The World* is a playful tapestry of stories woven around a decaying neighbourhood pub called The Junction Hotel. At the heart of the film is Max, the pub's ageing owner, and his struggle to keep the Junction open for the sake of his loyal but diminishing band of regular customers. As part of his increasingly desperate efforts, Max renames the pub The Progress Bar, brings in young bands and introduces contemporary international cuisine. But things don't turn out exactly as he hoped. Swirling around Max are a series of other events at the pub, from the troubled emotional life of a young Indian barmaid paying her way through uni to the appearance of two dead television journalists, whose ghosts present a news story featuring an ethereal angle on the social and political issues of the day. A disillusioned dishwasher, a juggling salesman and a creepy cleaner who believes there is truth in rubbish are among the other characters who have an impact on the unfolding events surrounding the future of the pub. Meanwhile, a wide range of customers drink at the bar and tell stories, reflect on world problems and chat about their everyday lives. Like the film, these pub conversations don't find any easy answers to the issues being discussed. But when it comes to changing the world, things are often not as easy as they seem.

## **Appendix 5 ... Contents of DVD 2**

This disc contains a variety of video excerpts that are referenced in the text or otherwise relevant to the research. There are 8 excerpts that can be accessed through the menu of the DVD. The excerpts are as follows:

### **1. Shot Tower Scene**

- 1a. Shot Tower Scene Take 1**
- 1b. Shot Tower Scene Take 2**
- 1c. Shot Tower Scene Close-up**
- 1d. Shot Tower Scene Final Version**

### **2. Jazz & Nick #1**

### **3. Jazz & Sarah**

### **4. Bar Scene**

### **5. Jazz & Nick #2**

### **6. Fussy Customers**

### **7. Holidays on the River Yarra**

### **8. Stargazers**